

Proceedings from the International Seminar on Literacy

Vision - Innovation - Participation



Secteur de la formation professionnelle et technique et de la formation continue

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de la formation générale
des adultes

Québec 

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

OPENING

WELCOMING ADDRESS.....	7
------------------------	---

OPENING REMARKS	7
-----------------------	---

CHAPTER 1 11

PLENARY SESSION 1

1. DEFINITION OF THE VARIOUS CONCEPTS ASSOCIATED WITH LITERACY	13
--	----

1.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF	14
---------------------------------------	----

Presentation by Marie-Thérèse Geffroy	14
---	----

Presentation by Robert Sarginson	15
--	----

Presentation by Louise Miller	15
-------------------------------------	----

Presentation by Scott Murray	16
------------------------------------	----

1.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS	17
---------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER 2 21

PLENARY SESSION 2

2. EXPRESSION OF EDUCATIONAL DEMAND IN ADULT EDUCATION	23
--	----

2.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF	24
---------------------------------------	----

Presentation by Isabelle Gobeil.....	24
--------------------------------------	----

Presentation by Maryse Perreault	25
--	----

Presentation by Jacques Bosman.....	26
-------------------------------------	----

Presentation by Shanoussa Aubin-Horth	27
---	----

Presentation by Chantal Ouellet.....	28
--------------------------------------	----

2.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS	29
---------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER 3	33
PLENARY SESSION 3	
3. ILLITERACY PREVENTION.....	35
3.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF.....	36
Presentation by Yvon Laberge	36
Presentation by Jean Hébrard.....	37
Presentation by Éric Nedelec	38
Presentation by Bernard Terrisse.....	39
Presentation by Hélène Tremblay	40
3.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS	41
CHAPTER 4	45
PLENARY SESSION 4	
4. ILLITERACY, HEALTH AND POPULATION AGING.....	47
4.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF.....	48
Presentation by Linda Shohet	48
Presentation by Scott Murray	49
Presentation by Marg Rose.....	50
Presentation by Margot Kaszap	51
Presentation by Robert Sarginson	53
4.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS	54
CHAPTER 5	57
PLENARY SESSION 5	
5. MOBILIZATION OF READING AND WRITING COMPETENCIES	59
5.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF.....	60
Presentation by Rachel Bélisle.....	60
Presentation by Michèle Minne	61
Presentation by Isabelle Clerc.....	62
Presentation by Maren Elfert.....	63
5.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS	64

CHAPTER 6	67
PLENARY SESSION 6	
6. GOVERNMENT POLICIES, ORIENTATIONS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH LITERACY	69
6.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF.....	70
Presentation by Michèle Stanton-Jean.....	70
Presentation by Marie-Thérèse Geffroy	71
Presentation by Michèle Minne	72
Presentation by Robert Nolet	73
6.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS	74
CHAPTER 7	77
PLENARY SESSION 7	
7. SUMMARY AND PROPOSALS	79
7.1. SUMMARY OF THE PLENARY SESSIONS.....	79
7.1.1. Vision	79
7.1.2. Innovation	82
7.1.3. Participation	84
7.2. ASPIRATIONS AND PROPOSALS.....	86
CLOSING REMARKS	89

Introduction

The idea for the International Literacy Seminar originated with the launch of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) (2003-2012). In this regard, the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) examined the UNLD action plan from the perspective of industrialized nations. In order to support its reflection and examine new avenues for development, it organized the Seminar to bring together various bodies to share research and experiences related to the field of literacy.

The concept of literacy or literacy skills is complex and now encompasses more than the acquisition of reading, writing and arithmetic skills:

As a result of these and other developments, understandings in the international policy community have expanded too: from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change.¹

The Hamburg Declaration (CONFINTEA V, 1997) and the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003) also proposed a definition of literacy and literacy skills that has gone beyond one-time learning to a broader commitment to an ongoing, lifelong process. The UNLD slogan, "*Literacy as Freedom*," which represents the freedom to be independent, to contribute to society and to make informed choices, has led to further exploration of the factors that impede the freedom of low-literate individuals. The findings of the most recent International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey have also intensified the reflection on illiteracy and functional illiteracy in industrialized countries.

Regarding the theme *Vision, Innovation, Participation*, the objectives of the Seminar were to:

- review the current definition of illiteracy, which no longer reflects the reality of industrialized countries where schooling is compulsory until at least 16 years of age
- reorganize official strategies for the expression of educational demand, in particular in light of the results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey
- study opportunities for complementarity between government policies on literacy and adult education and the various policies related to fields such as labour, poverty and social exclusion, immigration, health, culture and the environment
- discuss ideas and experiences related to literacy, health, population aging, the family and community environments and the mobilization of competencies
- consider opportunities for collaboration among the countries in attendance and determine courses of action to be taken following the Seminar
- reflect on how industrialized countries may help meet the objectives of the United Nations Literacy Decade

1. *Education for All, Global Monitoring Report* (2006, chap. 6), 147.

To achieve these objectives, two main questions were addressed by the participants:

- How do we define illiteracy, functional illiteracy, literacy and literacy skills in our respective areas of intervention?
- How do these definitions influence the major literacy programs (problem statement, target populations, orientations, priority actions, etc.) in different areas?

These questions were considered in greater detail during the first six plenary sessions, which focused on the following themes:

- definition of the various concepts associated with literacy (illiteracy, functional illiteracy, literacy, literacy skills)
- expression of educational demand in adult education
- illiteracy prevention within a perspective of lifelong learning
- illiteracy, health and population aging
- mobilization of reading and writing competencies
- government policies, orientations and priority actions associated with literacy, adult education and continuing education and training

Obviously, many more themes could have been explored during the work sessions. Others were also mentioned, and with good reason, including employment and work, second-language acquisition, as well as social and workplace integration or reintegration.

The vision and observations of participants at the end of the sessions, as well as the innovations and trends they defined, should undoubtedly strengthen participation in the fight against illiteracy. As had been hoped, by sharing information and examining the issues together, participants were able to identify innovative, collaborative, dynamic and promising courses of action.

The proceedings from the Seminar include the opening and closing remarks, as well as a summary of the presentations and discussions that took place during each of the six plenary sessions on the themes mentioned above. Moreover, the report on the seventh and final session, which focused on the conclusions and possible follow-up, can serve as an overall summary of the Seminar.





Opening

Welcoming Address

Lili Paillé, Director of the Direction de la formation générale des adultes at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport

Good morning and welcome to the International Literacy Seminar.

What brings us here today and for the next few days is not only an interest in adults' lifelong education and training, but also the conviction that we need to invest in adults who are most vulnerable and most affected by the rapid changes taking place in today's society. It is also the confidence that, together, we will be able to define new trends and avenues that will allow us to reach the greatest number of individuals, based on their immediate needs and on the needs of the next five or ten years, in order to establish literacy as a top priority in the modern world.

The people in this room possess a vast expertise that is guaranteed to lead to the most fruitful and enriching discussions. Whether you are from Québec, elsewhere in Canada, France, Belgium or Germany, the ideas you share are sure to add value to our policies, orientations and actions.

Thank you for attending. Without you this seminar could not have been possible.

I have no doubt that you will all enjoy the exchanges. So, without further ado, I would now like to turn the floor over to Michelle Lapointe, Assistant Deputy Minister for vocational and technical training and continuing education and training at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport.



Opening Remarks

Michelle Lapointe, Assistant Deputy Minister for vocational and technical training and continuing education and training at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I am pleased to convey the greetings and good wishes of Jean-Marc Fournier, Minister of Education, Sports and Leisure, who unfortunately could not be here today.

The task that has brought us here and that we will be tackling over the next four days will no doubt be most stimulating and interesting. In fact, events such as this one have already yielded inspiring results in Québec, the rest of Canada and in the countries represented here today. I am thinking specifically of Namur where, in 1999, representatives from francophone industrialized countries were invited by UNESCO to take stock of their activities and identify the main elements of a national literacy policy.

In France, several summer universities have also provided opportunities for sharing experiences and establishing various national and international collaborative networks to support the fight against illiteracy.

In Canada, representatives from the provinces and territories have gathered at annual meetings, in an effort to solve common problems and share expertise. In fact, this year's meeting took place here just yesterday and I am sure that some of the elements raised will find their way into your discussions as well.

The objective of this Seminar, which is part of this ongoing effort, is to reflect on the realities of industrialized countries in order to ensure equitable access to literacy services within a perspective of lifelong learning.

Two main questions will be addressed:

- How do we define illiteracy, functional illiteracy, literacy and literacy skills in our respective areas of intervention?
- How do these definitions influence the major literacy programs (problem statement, target populations, orientations, priority actions, etc.)?

I would like to add a third question, which should perhaps have come first:

- At the dawn of this 21st century, what prevents so many adults from acquiring the skills they need to deal with everyday life and to fully assume their role as citizens, for their own benefit and for that of society?

In knowledge-based societies such as ours, where schooling is compulsory until 16 or 18 years of age, depending on the case, why are skill levels so low, as was revealed in the recent International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey? These questions can be addressed with a variety of approaches: through prevention, by removing obstacles to participation, through the mobilization of competencies and by establishing multisectorial state priorities. These and other approaches will be explored under the various themes of the Seminar.

To promote reflection, we have created a public forum, a place of meeting and deliberation, where literacy can be dealt with in prospective terms. This should foster knowledge sharing and mutual learning.

As Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, the Director-General of UNESCO, reminded us several years ago in a UNESCO World Report entitled *Towards Knowledge Societies*, shared knowledge is a potent tool in the fight against poverty. The future development of societies depends less on their natural resources than on their ability to create, disseminate and use knowledge and in network societies, possibilities for sharing and exchange abound.

Considering the wealth of knowledge in this room, expectations are high. The Minister has asked me to tell you how eagerly he awaits the results of your discussions; he already knows they will be concrete and dynamic and will allow us to embark on new courses of action based on multiple, innovative, varied collaboration, for the benefit of our target population—adults with little schooling.

Before opening the first plenary session, I would like to briefly broach an issue that preoccupies us all. In fact, the subject that brings us here today has become a source of concern in the face of recent federal funding cuts. The Minister has asked me to reaffirm Québec's continued commitment to making literacy a priority. In this spirit, and like the other Canadian provinces and territories, Québec intends to discuss the matter with the federal bodies concerned as soon as possible.

I hope you enjoy the Seminar.

Thank you.



Chapter 1



Plenary Session 1

1. DEFINITION OF THE VARIOUS CONCEPTS ASSOCIATED WITH LITERACY

Two international surveys on adult literacy and skills (International Adult Literacy Survey—[IALS], 1994 and International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey [IALSS], 2003) have provided an opportunity to analyze the literacy problems observed in industrialized countries. Different realities were described under the terms of literacy skills or literacy. For example, according to the federal government, literacy “is using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential,”² while according to Legendre “literacy is the aptitude to understand written information in everyday life, at home, in the workplace and in the community, in order to achieve one’s personal goals and to broaden one’s knowledge and abilities.”³

UNESCO defines a literate person as:

[one who] has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and whose attainments in reading, writing and numeracy make it possible to use these skills towards his own and the community’s development.

Two questions were submitted to panellists before the Seminar to help them formulate their thoughts, and to promote discussion among participants:

- How should the terms *illiteracy*, *functional illiteracy*, *literacy* and *literacy skills* be defined?
- What are consequences of these definitions on accessibility to literacy services and activities and on government policies, actions plans, orientations associated with literacy, adult education and continuing education and training, as well as on other fields impacted by the issue?

Plenary session facilitator: Alain Mercier

From 1992 to 2005, Mr. Mercier was director of the Direction de la formation générale des adultes, Ministère de l’Éducation du Québec, which has since become the Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS). He was in charge of the development and implementation of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*. He was also chair for several MELS working groups, in particular for the *Policy on the Evaluation of Learning*. In addition to participating in numerous international conferences, he was the Québec representative at the regional council of the Fondation des Régions Européennes pour la Recherche en Education et en Formation (FREREF), from September 2003 to September 2005.

2. Statistics Canada, *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003) 198.
 3. Renald Legendre, *Dictionnaire actuel de l’éducation* (Montréal: Guérin, 2005) 841. [Free translation]

1.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF

Presentation by Marie-Thérèse Geffroy

Director of the Agence nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme (ANLCI) in France, Ms. Geffroy is president of the French committee for the WorldSkills Competition and vice-president of WorldSkills International. She is a member of the Haut Conseil de l'École and participated in the Commission Nationale du débat sur l'avenir de l'École. She also chaired the Comité de coordination des programmes régionaux d'apprentissage et de formation professionnelle continue. She holds a master's degree in classical languages and literature, and is the author of *L'illettrisme: Mieux comprendre pour mieux agir* (Éditions Milan).

First and foremost, Ms. Geffroy emphasized the importance of defining concepts in clear, simple terms, as this “helps us set a baseline and define precise indicators to measure the extent of a problem, and organize preventive and corrective measures to combat functional illiteracy by identifying exactly how many people are concerned, how old they are, what they do and where they live.”

Ms. Geffroy then distinguished between concepts of *illiteracy*, *functional illiteracy* and *French as a foreign language*. Illiteracy is a term used when referring to people who have never attended school and are learning to write for the first time. Functional illiteracy is used when referring to people who have attended school in France but have failed to master reading and writing and the basic skills needed to function independently in simple, everyday situations. Lastly, French as a foreign language is used when referring to newly arrived immigrants who do not speak French and must learn the language—a situation that differs from literacy and functional illiteracy, in that the latter two are defined in relation to one's mother tongue.

Referring to the concept of functional illiteracy, Ms. Geffroy presented the findings of a 2004-2005 survey conducted by the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE). According to the survey, 9 per cent of the population in France aged 18 to 65 (3.1 million people) are functionally illiterate. Of these, 53 per cent are over 45 years of age, 57 per cent are employed, 49 per cent live in rural or low density areas and 74 per cent spoke only French at home at the age of five. These data are important not only to counter certain preconceived ideas (that illiteracy and functional illiteracy mostly affect immigrants, seniors or populations living in tough urban neighbourhoods), but also to raise awareness and guide the efforts of decision-makers and society as a whole. Such is the aim of ANLCI and the policy underlying its actions throughout the country with respect to the target populations: “In terms of policy organization, the fight against functional illiteracy is part of the lifelong learning process, within which access to all basic skills, and their reacquisition and consolidation, must constitute a priority.”

For more information, please see Appendix 1.

Presentation by Robert Sarginson

Mr. Sarginson was previously the regional programming coordinator for the Literacy Partners of Manitoba and is currently the project director. He was a public school teacher for 30 years and is the author of *Literacy and Health: A Manitoba Perspective*.

In his presentation, Mr. Sarginson showed that, although functional illiteracy in Manitoba has been decreasing over generations and low literacy rates are declining, the problem of low literacy skills in Canada still needs to be addressed.

Given that young people now spend considerably more time in school, low literacy affects mostly older generations, even if a certain number of young people are more or less literate when they leave the school system. Mr. Sarginson therefore states, not without a certain irony, that the problem could be resolved by letting time take its course. In his opinion, this may be the type of thinking adopted by certain political decision-makers who prefer to ignore the problem.

For more information, please see Appendix 2.

Presentation by Louise Miller

Ms. Miller has been an advisor with the FTQ's Service de l'éducation since 1990, in charge of workplace training, including literacy. She was coordinator for the Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec (1980-1990), a member of the board of directors and executive committee of the Institut canadien de l'éducation des adultes (ICÉA)⁴ (1981-1990), a member of the International Task Force on Literacy under the International Council for Adult Education (1985-1990) and a literacy instructor for prison inmates.

From the outset, Ms. Miller noticed that definitions are rarely neutral: they generally entail a political dimension in that they lead one to ask "for whom" and "why" is a particular definition favoured over another. She also observed that definitions of illiteracy have changed over time along with society's requirements.

Ms. Miller began by questioning the validity of defining illiteracy by skill level, as well as the limitations and side effects of measuring these levels, as was done in the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS).⁵ She also questioned both the strictly individual aspect and the type of literacy skills measured, which fail to take into account several skills that low literate individuals use in order to function and play an active role in society.

According to Ms. Miller, the "definition of concepts is not a neutral process and [...] we must ensure that concepts serve the needs of the individuals targeted."

4. ICEA is now known as the Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes.

5. The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) produced a scale consisting of five proficiency levels in literacy, with level 3 being the minimum skill level considered necessary to function in today's world.

Ms. Miller then questioned the impact (generally defined in socioeconomic terms) that the increase in requirements has on those who have difficulty with written information: “We must ensure that the dimensions we add to our interpretations do not end up discouraging the people we want to reach.” The consequence of measuring these skills or competencies may lead to the exclusion of those who are most vulnerable, by concentrating the governments’ limited resources on individuals with level 2 skills who may only need limited training in order to reach level 3. “What I refuse to accept is that we give up on those who have the greatest needs.”

For more information, please see Appendix 3.

Presentation by Scott Murray

Scott Murray is currently director, responsible for education system results, of the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Program (LAMP) at the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. He has specialized in the design and conduct of large-scale surveys to meet emerging public policy issues, in particular international comparative work in the area of the assessment of adult skill and participation in adult education and training. Mr. Murray was the international study director for the International Adult Literacy Survey.

Mr. Murray’s presentation focused on developing a conceptual framework for defining essential skills and for implementing an approach for measuring these skills at the international level. Essential skills are the “skills or abilities that individuals need in order to achieve success in life, within the context of their sociocultural milieu, through adaptation to, shaping of, and selection of environments.” Mr. Murray underlined certain political aspects regarding the use of results for those working with the target populations and the political decision-makers to whom these results are submitted.

After reminding the audience that this research was international in scope, Mr. Murray described the process for designing the conceptual framework that led to a definition of essential literacy skills. The first perspective was psychometric and resulted in the construction of a hierarchy of key competencies by context. It was coupled with a socioeconomic approach to justify why the skills or competencies chosen were deemed essential. For example, as Mr. Murray mentioned, it takes individuals with level 1 or level 2 skills an average of 38 weeks to re-enter the job market after losing their jobs, while those with level 3 skills or higher need an average of nine weeks.

Stating that close to 50 per cent of Canadian adults aged 16 to 65 have level 1 or level 2 literacy skills, Mr. Murray concluded that we must take action if we want to raise skill levels in Canada. We must convince politicians of the urgency of the situation, because the demands of globalization and the rapid changes in information and communications technologies leave us no choice in the matter.

For more information, please see Appendix 4.

1.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

Following the presentations of the first plenary session, the participants dealt with definitions of the concepts associated with literacy and their impact on the organization of training and practices.

Definitions of literacy

The participants generally agreed that the terms associated with literacy should be defined as this allows the situation to be named and measured. The participants also agreed that these definitions should be expressed in terms of skills or competencies to be acquired in order to function in life and in society.

This raised two questions:

- What are the expectations with respect to these competencies?
- What defines these expectations?

The discussion revealed that definitions are influenced by the goals of those who make or use these definitions. While there was agreement that a problem must be assessed so that it can be resolved, convince or guide the decision-makers, or enlighten and support the work done with the target populations, participants also admitted that definitions vary depending on the point of view adopted.

A macroeconomic point of view focuses on people's ability to deal with the ongoing changes that characterize today's societies and the lives of their members. "We cannot promote the use of a pen knife to cut down a tree, when there are 50-cm chain saws that could do the trick." The minimum level of skills needed to cope with change must therefore be established and measured.

A psychosocial perspective focuses on the conditions that are needed for individuals, groups and communities to function in society in order to adapt to it and contribute to its development. The concerns expressed during the discussions relating to this perspective can be summarized as follows:

- There is a fear that, by focusing on change—particularly on change resulting from information and communications technologies—we may increase the level of skills required and eventually lead to the marginalization or exclusion of a greater percentage of the population. Such escalating demands in skills could result in the hiring of overqualified individuals in jobs that would cause their skills to deteriorate through lack of practice, and prevent those without diplomas from finding jobs.
- There is concern that the definition of skills or competencies could be driven mainly by economic expectations.
- Some of the skills or competencies employed by individuals or populations classified at level 1 or level 2 according to IALSS are not being recognized.
- Some of the terms used have negative connotations.

- Questions were raised concerning the design and development of measuring tools that may contain cultural biases, since a brief upgrading session on the style and type of questions asked is sometimes all it takes for certain individuals to improve their scores on placement tests.

Participants therefore had certain reservations concerning the terms used to describe and measure the situation.

Impact of definitions on the organization of literacy and its practices

Many participants distinguished between functional illiteracy, illiteracy, foreign- or second-language learning, with all these concepts implying varying literacy skill levels. These participants felt that it is important to label a problem before finding a solution, especially since, in a context of limited resources, political and economic decision-makers tend to ignore the individuals concerned who are not in the habit of speaking out or organizing collective action.

Other participants, concerned about target populations, were wary of the negative connotation of some of the concepts in question. Using literacy skill levels does not resolve the issue because they refer to low literacy skills and the minimum performance level (Level 3) required for meeting the demands of everyday life in today's society; and a distinction is therefore made between those who have these skills and those who do not.

In short, two different types of discourse are used, depending on whether decision-makers or the individuals and populations concerned are being addressed. In the first case, in order to better sensitize and persuade, the focus is on the magnitude of problems of functional illiteracy and illiteracy. In the other case, individuals are valued by emphasizing their various skills in order to promote and support any learning process that could contribute to improving their situations.

Whatever the case, the participants recognized that work must be done with the target populations in order to offer appropriate services, and decision-makers must be persuaded to support and guide the services offered.

The distinction made in France between *illettrisme* (functional illiteracy) and *analphabétisme* (illiteracy) seemed well accepted by the participants. Illiteracy is used to refer to individuals who have never been exposed to written language, while functional illiteracy is used to describe individuals who have serious difficulties with written information, despite the fact that they have attended school. It is generally recognized that functional illiteracy poses a greater challenge than illiteracy, given that the former is often accompanied by negative attitudes towards school, learning or training, and a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence.

Moreover, the challenge of illiteracy or functional illiteracy changes if it is associated with foreign or second-language acquisition. Learning a foreign language or, from the perspective of positive integration, a second language, entails different issues depending on whether one is illiterate, poorly educated or highly educated in one's native language. The situation is even more complex for Aboriginal populations for whom francization is not part of the immigration context.

Therefore, illiteracy cannot be defined, at least not for those responsible for training services and activities, without referring to the target populations, and without taking into account their characteristics, situation, needs and competencies. The case of immigrant and Aboriginal populations was mentioned, as was the situation of rural populations and the handicapped. The central role played by parents in preventing illiteracy was also discussed.

Concerning these different populations and their specific characteristics, certain participants suggested that it might be useful to position literacy within a continuum of competency acquisition that accompanies functional illiteracy. While a large majority of individuals and groups will develop skills through lifelong learning, progressing from elementary school to university, or going from level 1 to subsequent literacy skill levels, others will develop their skills orally. Thus, many participants emphasized the need to focus on the culture and experience of the weakest populations, on the recognition of their practices and skills, whatever these may be, on real and expressed needs, and on the activities that are important to them.

At the end of the discussions, the following statements were retained:

- The definitions used should help better understand the populations targeted and their reality, improve the design and organization of the services they need, and persuade and guide decision-makers to act accordingly.
- While these definitions must take into account macroeconomic factors, such as the globalization of economies based on the production, dissemination and use of knowledge, they must also consider in their entirety the groups and individuals directly targeted, with all their prior learning and potential for growth.
- Illiteracy must be defined within a continuum of competency acquisition that encompasses more than reading and writing and is a part of a perspective of lifelong learning.
- All sectors of society are affected and all social stakeholders should be mobilized to create nearby support networks.



Chapter 2



Plenary Session 2

2. EXPRESSION OF EDUCATIONAL DEMAND IN ADULT EDUCATION

Québec's 2002 *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* proposes a general aim of encouraging the demand for learning: "In a context of lifelong learning, it is no longer sufficient simply to meet the explicit demand. Appropriate mechanisms must be found to stimulate the demand."⁶

In 2006, in a brief to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation defined the expression of educational needs as "a process by which individuals, groups or organizations assess their situation, set a goal, become aware of the gap that learning may bridge, and identify and define a need for education to achieve the goal."⁷

Moreover, according to recent studies, this expression of educational demand is impeded by certain obstacles, generally the same ones that discourage participation in educational or training activities.

In light of these observations, the panellists were asked the following questions:

- How can we define the expression of learning and continuing education demand among low-literacy adults?
- How can this definition influence the literacy services offered?
- To encourage low-literacy adults to participate, what direction should the expression of educational demand take? What means should be implemented in order to remove the obstacles to participation?

Plenary session facilitator: Brigitte Voyer

Ms. Voyer is a professor in the department of education and specialized training, and director of undergraduate adult education and training programs at the Université du Québec à Montréal. A specialist in adult education, Ms. Voyer has a doctorate in the foundations of education and a master's degree in andragogy. Her research work focuses primarily on clarifying the relationships between professional development, education and continuing education and training. Ms. Voyer has conducted studies on employability, equal opportunity in education and atypical training. She is the co-author of a study on the expression of needs in general education⁸ and in 2002 edited a collection of articles entitled *Formateurs et formatrices d'adultes: identités professionnelles, pratiques et conditions de travail*.

6. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002) 5.

7. Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Promoting the expression of adult education needs: a question of social equity*, Brief to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports, Abridged version (Québec: CSE, April 2006) 3.

8. Paul Bélanger and Brigitte Voyer, *L'aide à l'expression de la demande éducative en formation générale et l'accueil de cette demande dans les commissions scolaires du Québec* (Montréal: CIRDEP-UQAM, 2004).

2.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF

Presentation by Isabelle Gobeil

Ms. Gobeil is coordinator of the Commission on Adult Education of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE), an independent body, separate from the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), whose mandate is to provide consultation and critical analysis sheltered from pressure groups by a framework of democratic institutions. Ms. Gobeil has written numerous briefs, including *Promoting the expression of adult education needs: a question of social equity* (April 2006), and was responsible for a number of files with the Direction de la formation générale des adultes at the MELS.

Ms. Gobeil began her presentation by specifying that, for the CSE, “considering the future of adult education from the perspective of the expression of needs constitutes a political choice that holds the promise of substantial changes.” She reminded her audience that a brief on this issue published in 2006 did not deal with the expression of educational demand *per se* or its results, but rather with the conditions that promote or discourage this expression of needs. There are inequalities in adults' ability to express needs just as there are inequalities in adults' participation in education and training. According to the CSE, removing obstacles to the expression of educational demand and to participation is a social issue—it is “a question of social equity.”

Establishing the conditions that foster the expression of demand in adult education and continuing education and training, particularly among low-literacy individuals, poses four challenges: 1) reaching out to potential users, 2) stimulating demand for education and training, 3) facilitating the expression of educational demand, and 4) supporting adults' decision to train, starting with the development of a training plan. Regarding these challenges, the CSE noted that initiatives that facilitate the expression of demand are limited and few resources are devoted to them, especially those leading up to education and training.

As for increasing the participation of low-literacy adults in education and training and removing barriers to participation, Ms. Gobeil noted that, according to the CSE, “the expression of needs cannot reach all audiences concerned without additional financial commitment, especially from the State.”

Ms. Gobeil then presented three of four key ideas that served as the foundation for the CSE's recommendations, the fourth one being about the CSE:

- officially recognizing and promoting the rights of adults to learning and continuing education and training
- calling upon organizations to promote the value of adult education and continuing education and training
- organizing reception services to meet individual or community needs independent of enrollment in a training program

Ms. Gobeil concluded her presentation by discussing some of the CSE's recommendations that are more closely related to the expression of needs among low-literacy populations and individuals. In addition to recognizing and promoting the right to education and training and reviewing the funds earmarked for basic education, the CSE recommends implementing, with the appropriate funding, reception and support services, including the record of learning, the recognition of prior learning and competencies, and the dissemination of information about these services.

For more information, please see Appendix 5.

Presentation by Maryse Perreault

A graduate of history and translation, Ms. Perreault has acquired vast experience in the field of literacy. She has been working in adult education since the early 1990s, and has facilitated and coordinated literacy activities, and then built on her skills with organizations whose mission is to promote adult education and its main networks, in particular within the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. Ms. Perreault has also implemented a number of customized basic training projects in the workplace with help from the education community. After acting as assistant director of the Fondation pour l'alphabétisation, she has been president-director general since March 2006.

Given the fact that the annual participation rate of low-literacy adults in education and training has never exceeded two per cent in Québec, Ms. Perreault suggested that the problem of non-expression of educational needs must first be addressed before demand and participation can be stimulated. The problem is not solely educational—it is social, economic and cultural as well. It stems from factors related to poverty, which when combined, lead to exclusion, or even self-exclusion: “Children from disadvantaged families, whose parents are generally less educated than the average, enter school bearing the weight of statistics that condemn them to learning difficulties, dropping out of school and, in the long-run, a vicious cycle of undereducation and poverty.”

What needs to change is the culture of poverty, along with the conditions and behaviours associated with it. According to Ms. Perreault, this cannot be achieved using the means that have been put in place since the 1980s. She therefore put forth a few solutions that go beyond the sphere of education and require “a range of actions and initiatives led by several actors in society.” She described broader interventions that deal with poverty-related issues and suggested integrating, as needed, literacy activities and support and assistance services for those who are already involved in education or training programs, in order to encourage perseverance, promote success and make dropout prevention a collective effort by enlisting the help of parents.

According to Ms. Perreault, we must first listen to the education and training needs expressed. The Fondation pour l'alphabétisation listens to requests made through two assistance and referral hotlines that are free and confidential: *Info-Alpha* and *Info Apprendre*. By following up on individuals who have used these services, the Fondation has been able to establish a profile of users' motivations, predispositions and perceptions concerning education and training: “In the end, this profile brings us back to a culture of poverty and to the challenges of removing barriers of all types that prevent the most vulnerable populations from participating in education and training.”

In closing, Ms. Perreault called for “an overhaul of literacy training and adult basic education in Québec.”

For more information, please see Appendix 6.

Presentation by Jacques Bosman

Mr. Bosman is part of the organization *Lire et Écrire en Communauté française* in Belgium. He is co-author of a publication that identifies major literacy trends in the French community, highlighting 30 years of awareness-raising and recruiting.

Mr. Bosman began his presentation by describing *Lire et écrire en Communauté française*, an association that was born out of the Belgian labour movement and whose mission is to:

- raise awareness and inform public opinion and authorities
- promote service offerings
- fight against the causes of illiteracy or functional illiteracy

This organization, which includes 280 paid employees and 200 volunteers, offers various activities and services:

- reception, information and guidance services for individuals
- assistance and support services for training organizations
- training services for trainers
- the creation of new training centres
- the coordination of a network of 200 providers
- research
- awareness-raising using different means

The organization reaches approximately 16 000 people per year. While in urban areas, particularly in Brussels, demand cannot always be met due to a lack of resources, in rural areas and in the workplace, it must be stimulated. Participants tend to include more women than men, and more immigrants than native Belgians. Most do not have jobs and include the unemployed, welfare recipients, stay-at-homes and refugees. They are therefore among the weakest members of society, often isolated and difficult to reach. Such is the profile of the target population in broad terms.

While offering an appropriate response to training needs is a major challenge, promoting educational demand among those who do not participate in the organization's activities is an even greater one. According to Mr. Bosman, the general tendency in Belgium is to ignore the problem: there are no poor or illiterate individuals in Belgium, perhaps only a few foreigners. The subject is taboo and the authorities usually deny the existence of a problem. Only now is the issue coming to light, but no one really knows how to broach the subject. Until recently, there was no public strategy to promote the

expression of educational demand or any concerted action among ministries or various sectors of society.

In Mr. Bosman's opinion, we need to work on many fronts at the same time. We need to understand the reasons why low-literate individuals seek training and determine what motivates them to do so. We need to promote literacy and raise awareness among the public at large and among political decision-makers. The situation must be demystified among target populations and those who are capable of intervening. Service offerings must also be diversified and increased. Often organizations that could make a relevant and much-needed contribution have a mission that includes neither education nor literacy training. Here again, awareness-raising and a call for action is essential. Associations and common initiatives must be supported. Literacy must be incorporated into training that provides qualifications, particularly in the workplace. Ideally, all public organizations should take into account the needs of illiterate individuals and train their staff on how to reach, inform and guide these individuals.

There is also a need to raise awareness and inform both young people and teachers in the education sector. For these groups, and for other groups as well, work can be done with adults undergoing training who are willing to share their experiences and talk about their situation.

These actions must be planned in the long term, and one must agree to persevere and keep starting over.

Presentation by Shanoussa Aubin-Horth

Ms. Aubin-Horth earned a master's degree in sociology from the Université du Québec à Montréal in 2002. During her university studies, she was a research assistant at the Centre interuniversitaire de recherche sur la science et la technologie (CIRST), where she focused on various issues related to the sociology of education, including program production in continuing education and training. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies in education at the Université du Québec à Rimouski. Her thesis is on the obstacles to adult participation in basic education activities. As a research assistant, she contributed to the data collection, analysis, and writing of the Lavoie Levesque report *Obstacles à la participation des adultes peu scolarisés à des activités de formation dans un cadre formel et non formel*.⁹

After reviewing the background and objectives of the research on the obstacles that prevent undereducated adults from taking part in training activities, Ms. Aubin-Horth focused her presentation on "dispositional" obstacles and on how to counter them:

Learning difficulties, failure and grade repetition, placement in specialized classes or individualized paths [...] are all considered to be painful experiences that resulted in the people interviewed feeling "abnormal," "different" and unable to learn [...] A loss of self-esteem, and a

9. Natalie Lavoie and Jean-Yves Lévesque, *Obstacles à la participation des adultes peu scolarisés à des activités de formation dans un cadre formel et non formel*, research report (Rimouski: Université du Québec à Rimouski, 2004).

tendency to feel incompetent and to undervalue their own intelligence and learning ability, made these undereducated adults extremely anxious about taking part in training activities, and also made them insecure in their daily lives.

This type of negative predisposition can eliminate any positive predisposition that could encourage a person to seek training.

Ms. Aubin-Horth noted that the need to learn is always there in adults, but we must find a way to rekindle the desire to learn. According to the researchers, education in lifelong learning is key. Learning should not be limited to school and should continue throughout a person's life. It is essential to recognize and value lifelong learning as a normal and rewarding process. We must help adults transform their relationship with respect to learning by adding the dimension of continuity implied by the term "lifelong." This will help promote the expression of educational demand and increase adults' participation in education and training activities.

Education in lifelong learning can only be promoted by an extensive advertising campaign. The right to education must be recognized for people of all ages and knowledge of this right must be widespread. To this end, Ms. Aubin-Horth listed a series of measures and conditions, including continuing education and training and a variety of methods: a positive promotional campaign that avoids stigmatization, integrating literacy into basic education, etc.

For more information, please see Appendix 7.

Presentation by Chantal Ouellet

Ms. Ouellet has been a professor with the department of education and specialized training (educational and social adaptation) at the Université du Québec à Montréal since 2003. She has been exploring literacy since the 1980s and did her doctoral studies in this field. She taught literacy to adults at various school boards in Québec and worked in international cooperation projects in West Africa from 1988 to 1993. She continues to research various issues related to literacy with different partners and organizations.

Ms. Ouellet began her presentation by reviewing the action research project initiated in 2004-2005 on behalf of nine school boards in the Montérégie region in order to diversify the supply of literacy services based on the expression of educational demand that must often be encouraged.

At the outset, a hypothesis "that collaboration with community organizations is necessary to make contact with low-literacy adults" was formulated. Interviews were conducted with representatives of some 80 organizations. Based on the results of these interviews, the following observations were made:

- Community organizations seem very willing to work with adult education centres (of school boards).
- There is a certain mistrust among community literacy groups.

- Solutions have been put forth concerning the roles played by organizations in compliance with their mission.
- Concerted effort (between organizations and school boards) is indispensable.
- There is a need to change practices at school boards (pedagogical practices, collaborative practices).
- Other programs seem to match planned literacy training approaches (for example, social and sociovocational integration programs).

These observations constitute a challenging course of action that requires, among other conditions, a lot of work in the field, coordination in the community and a political will on behalf of school boards, the latter of which is sometimes lacking.

Following the consultations with organizations, Ms. Ouellet then met with adults who participated in training activities and with adults who did not, in order to find out about their needs and their attitudes or disposition towards education and training. The results presented here revealed that adults who participated in training activities decided to do so of their own initiative and were generally satisfied with the services offered. Non-participating adults, who were often weakened by difficult socioeconomic conditions, were concerned about their survival and generally did not have precise goals or plans. They faced numerous “dispositional” obstacles. The prospect of a more satisfying job was their greatest source of motivation, but it was often accompanied by a lack of confidence in training activities, particularly short-term training.

A large percentage of low-literacy adults do not take part in training activities. In general, these adults live far from training centres and do not feel concerned by the services offered. It is absolutely essential to reach out to these adults through a variety of methods using an ongoing approach. Ms. Ouellet concluded her presentation by specifying that only with the help of development officers who can devote themselves full time to these tasks will this be possible.

For more information, please see Appendix 8.

2.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

Discussions during the second plenary session focused mainly on obstacles that hinder the expression of educational demand among undereducated adults and on some of the conditions that help promote the expression of this demand.

Obstacles that hinder the expression of educational demand

At the outset, participants underlined that the expression of educational demand is an ambiguous concept that has certain limitations:

- Educational demand is often a non-demand that is expressed by resistance to any training activity perceived as not relevant or meaningful by the target population.

- Educational demand is not spontaneous, particularly among functionally illiterate individuals. It must be stimulated and usually stems from a need associated with a problem situation that can be resolved through literacy training, among other things.
- In the workplace, the expression of needs often stops at the management level. Workers are seldom consulted about their basic education needs.
- Demand for educational or training services must often bow to pressure from government programs that favour brief employability programs. These short programs tend to discourage demand for basic education services that require more time. The same phenomenon occurs when priority is given to 16-24-year-olds, with the end result being that the adult education centres get transformed into centres for helping dropouts get back in school.
- The expression of educational demand is meaningless if it is not elicited, promoted and supported.
- Educational demand cannot be expressed if it does not yield results, such as greater job satisfaction, a promotion (if one has a job), conserving of resources, or improved parent-child relations.
- Assessing educational demand quickly leads to an offer of service that is qualified, rightly or not, as an adapted response.

It is recognized that efforts regarding literacy over the past decades have not yielded the results expected. In Québec, only two per cent of the target population has been reached. It is deplorable that this silent demand concerns neither public opinion nor political and economic decision-makers.

Despite great efforts to promote and adapt traditional service offerings, participation has not increased. The problem appears to be one of exclusion or self-exclusion. The populations targeted by literacy, like most undereducated populations, do not feel concerned by calls to acquire training or the services offered, mostly because of resistance stemming from negative experiences with school. This situation is closely linked to the various economic and social forms of poverty and exclusion.

Conditions that help promote educational demand

In this context, participants recognized that reaching potential users, stimulating educational demand and supporting adults in their decisions are major challenges. To meet these challenges, several practices and conditions are needed:

- Target specific populations, concentrate on their situation, on specific interests or concrete needs, as in the case of family literacy.
- As mentioned in the first plenary session, position literacy within a continuum of lifelong competency acquisition.
- Promote the development of personal or career plans, which may include, if relevant, meaningful training plans; the use of information and communications technologies, particularly the Internet, seems promising, especially for intergenerational plans.
- Focus on existing competencies of individuals and the groups to which they belong: recognize, value and develop these competencies in order to foster the acquisition of new skills, including literacy skills.

- Adopt a comprehensive approach based on the mobilization of agents for change in all sectors of society (e.g. public opinion, economic and political decision-makers, the media, service providers), as well as on the duration of programs and intervention measures.
- Encourage all public services to become involved in literacy, in particular through popular education for the public in general and through continuing education and training for their personnel.
- Recognize and promote a variety of training sites and services (e.g. formal education networks, local municipalities or communities, cultural organizations, businesses, unions and associations).
- Integrate literacy into workplace training programs that provide qualifications.
- Consult adults who are in education or training programs; make it easier for them to get together and to act; emphasize peer literacy.
- Seek inspiration from Ireland where they use “literacy tutors,” particularly with populations targeted by literacy services; it was also suggested, as considered in Aboriginal populations, to apply the role of “informal caregivers” to the field of literacy.
- Promote and develop a culture of lifelong learning or continuing education and training among the entire population through a vast, ongoing information and awareness campaign.
- Raise awareness and persuade political decision-makers of the importance of acting in a planned manner on specific targets; recognize the need to coordinate sociocommunity resources to effectively meet educational demand.

Finally, it was highly recommended that educational demand not be stimulated if an adequate response cannot be guaranteed.



Chapter 3



Plenary Session 3

3. ILLITERACY PREVENTION

The International Literacy Seminar provided an opportunity to take stock of the current situation in the fight against illiteracy, as reflected in various government policies on adult education and the experiences and programs in the European Community and North America.

Changing approaches to illiteracy prevention in various countries were reviewed, along with the ways in which illiteracy prevention is applied in these countries' policies and the various types of prevention that have been carried out within a perspective of lifelong learning.

More specifically, this plenary session covered the definitions of prevention, the underlying concepts, the stakeholders involved at all levels and their roles, the types of approaches recommended and their application, the outcomes, the obstacles and the challenges posed in the context of policies associated with adult education and lifelong learning, especially in disadvantaged areas.

Lastly, the session dealt with future prospects, emerging areas of exploration and the collaborative efforts to be initiated.

The panellists focused on a number of questions, including:

- How is illiteracy prevention defined and how has this definition evolved through policies and programs?
- How can prevention influence the demand for education and training?
- How can prevention impact other areas of life, such as health?
- Can illiteracy prevention contribute to mobilizing citizens and creating diversified educational settings that are conducive to developing and maintaining reading and writing practices?
- What forms can illiteracy prevention take in policies associated with adult education and lifelong learning?

Plenary session facilitator: François Blain

Mr. Blain holds a master's degree in project management from the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). He works primarily in research and development in the field of education, more specifically in prevention and intervention in disadvantaged areas. In collaboration with Hélène Tremblay, he designed and coordinated the "Hand in Hand From A to Z!" project (*De A à Z, on s'aide!*) on emergent literacy in young children from working-class families. He also collaborated in developing the first chapter of the Québec government's policy on reading and books (*Politique de la lecture et du livre*). Mr. Blain is currently a resource person with the Direction de la formation générale des adultes at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, supporting and implementing the school, family and community program for the prevention of illiteracy (*Famille-école-communauté: réussir ensemble!*) He is also a course lecturer for UQAM's department of education and a member and vice-chairman of the Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance.

3.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF

Presentation by Yvon Laberge

Mr. Laberge is director of Éduk, a non-profit organization that provides access to education and training programs in French to adults in Alberta. Mr. Laberge's professional activities and research projects have covered a variety of fields, including literacy, community development and adult education. He has been working as a consultant since the early 1990s, specializing in needs assessment, program evaluation, strategic planning and project management. His current research deals with highlighting the potential of marginalized communities. A founding member of the Family Literacy Action Group and the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (FCAF), Mr. Laberge participated in developing the training program on the foundations of family literacy (available in English and French) and worked with an intersectoral consultative team in formulating the Parent-Child Literacy Strategy for Alberta Advanced Education. In 2005, he was appointed to the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, a federal government committee that is responsible for formulating a pan-Canadian literacy strategy. He is also a member of the board of directors of FCAF and Frontier College.

Mr. Laberge's presentation focused on illiteracy prevention among minority French speakers in a province in full economic and demographic expansion. The increase in demographic growth, due in part to high interprovincial migration from the rest of Canada, has resulted in an increase of 4 000 individuals from 1996 to 2001, out of a total population of some 22 000 native French speakers. Given that 75 per cent of these children grow up in exogamous families, the risk of assimilation is great, if no serious effort is made to promote French culture.

Illiteracy prevention is part of the sociocultural measures aimed at developing the French-speaking community. According to Mr. Laberge, functional literacy is "the building of meaning, taking into account the social and cultural context of a person who values, speaks, reads, writes and acts in his or her environment." It involves multiple literacies: personal literacy, academic literacy and community literacy. Its aims are to develop skills in reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as additive bilingualism and a Francophone identity.

From this perspective, prevention is "an ongoing, global process targeting the development of individuals and the community." To succeed, this process must be strategic, targeted and partnership-based.

Éduk is involved in family literacy, support for interlinguistic families and francization and re-francization. Such an undertaking requires support from the government, which must recognize the specific needs of the French-speaking minority and ensure stable funding in order to provide a permanent structure for this collective endeavour.

For more information, please see Appendix 9.

Presentation by Jean Hébrard

Mr. Hébrard is the inspector general of the Ministry of National Education in France. He was part of a group of experts who helped design and develop the new curriculum. A member of the Observatoire national de la lecture (ONL) and an historian, he has written numerous books on the French school system and its history. Mr. Hébrard has played an active role in designing the new elementary-school programs and helped introduce children's literature and students' general culture in schools.

According to Mr. Hébrard, in societies where schooling is compulsory up to the age of 16, prevention essentially takes place in the school. After age 16 or 18, it is no longer considered prevention but remediation. Both prevention and remediation differ depending on the target group: "some people (between six and eight per cent in France) have disorders or disabilities that prevent them from accessing written culture in the long term." This may be the case of immigrants who were illiterate in their country of origin or whose native language is far removed from that of the host country. For groups such as these, with specific needs, the usual intervention programs yield few results, as resistance to written culture is strong.

In his presentation, Mr. Hébrard focused more on functional illiteracy, that is, on populations who have serious problems with written information in spite of their schooling: "[In France] between 20 and 25 per cent of young adults are unable to process written information at a level sufficient to complete their secondary education successfully [...] and enter the job market." As they enter secondary school, at around age 12, their written language skills are considered to be insufficient for them to follow secondary-level courses and to pass.

Causes of the situation and prevention measures to consider

These two issues underpin the model that explains the phenomenon and forms the foundation of France's prevention policy. This model is based on progress in neuroscience and cognitive science, and more recently in social science, that has led decision-makers to redefine illiteracy prevention by focusing on "lower-level processes (basic alphabetical principle, graphophonetic relations and word identification)" and on inference, a process whereby individuals understand a situation, question, or text by referring to "the database capitalized in their memory since childhood. "For education and prevention policies, the question of "basic culture" becomes central. In France, for example, basic culture is described in the legislation as the "shared basis of skills and knowledge."

Thus, it is interesting to examine why family culture carries such weight that schools have difficulty countering its effects: "It has been generally accepted since the 1970s that schools are virtually unable to counterbalance the impact of family education." Why is a child with dysphasia from an advantaged family capable of undertaking university studies when a similar child from a disadvantaged family remains illiterate? "Access to new information necessarily requires mediation based not on writing but on dialogical exchanges of words." To ensure access to or progress in reading and writing, we need both a cultural database and mediation between oral and written information: "It is therefore easy to understand how, during childhood, the role of family mediation

can be so preponderant when even ten to fifteen years of formal education are unable to replace it (social affiliation is still the best predictor of a student's comprehension abilities)."

If written culture is a way of retaining oral culture, written culture must be introduced by mediators who allow individuals to enter the written world as though it were an extension and enrichment of oral culture.

On this basis, Mr. Hébrard asked the following questions during his presentation:

- How are databases that promote written culture developed in the different cultural environments of society?
- Can prevention policies help children who do not have the necessary basics to access written culture?
- Can we create diversified mediation spaces that take into account society's heterogeneous culture?
- Can we reach and provide appropriate help to minority, special needs and disadvantaged populations?

In closing, Mr. Hébrard underlined the immense challenge of having people attribute the same meaning to a message in order to improve life in society. He emphasized the importance of promoting understanding among communities to bridge the gap between cultures: "Clearly, then, what is at issue here is not just the problem of literacy training, but the much more complex question of the skills required for a shared understanding of the world in which we live."

For more information, please see Appendix 10.

Presentation by Éric Nedelec

Mr. Nedelec is in charge of illiteracy prevention, educational partnerships and training engineering at the Agence Nationale de Lutte contre l'Illettrisme (ANLCI) in France. He has been the area manager for a popular education movement since 2002, and an instructor/coordinator for a personalized training workshop (for young people and adults) since 1999. He has also been a continuing education advisor for national education since 2001 (designing training programs for persons without basic skills).

According to Mr. Nedelec, the approach to illiteracy prevention should be lifelong as well as life-wide. While the objective is to detect, as early as possible, problems that could be at the source of functional illiteracy, prevention initiatives must first and foremost satisfy needs as they arise throughout the learning and educational process, so that emerging needs do not become recurring difficulties:

All initiatives that help people to learn the French language and facilitate access to written culture, as well as all initiatives that help children to develop the desire and ability to learn, make a

contribution to the prevention of illiteracy. Preventive initiatives take place prior to the event and are situated largely upstream; they create conditions in which problems are less able to take root.

To prevent illiteracy from taking root, measures must above all facilitate access to written culture through work with families. Ideally, these measures must be aimed directly at the populations affected by the issue and not at some ill-defined, impersonal group.

For Mr. Nedelec, preventive initiatives are designed to:

- detect problems and risk factors as early as possible, before children even begin school
- provide children, parents and entire families with the help they need
- build or rebuild a learning dynamic conducive to the development of language, reading and writing skills. Avoid fatalistic discourse, recognize that a variety of paths exists, that skills and competencies can be developed through experience, and that experiential learning can be validated
- guide individuals during transitions or changes so that these do not lead to disengagement
- lead to opportunities for lifelong learning by recognizing a variety of life-wide learning acquired in a variety of settings. Some detours must be taken outside of traditional literacy training sites through training primarily centred on needs considered as vital by low-literacy individuals. Recognizing and facilitating these detours supports the expression of educational demand

Such a perspective cannot be possible without partnerships among all social actors (culture, recreation, health, labour, social assistance, administration, consumer affairs, education and training, citizenship, etc.) that are recognized and supported by the government. Civic engagement is crucial. We must move towards building interrelated living spaces, “towards a shared educational space that is both lifelong and life-wide.”

For more information, please see Appendix 11.

Presentation by Bernard Terrisse

Mr. Terrisse is a professor at the department of education and specialized training at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He is in charge of the Groupe de Recherche en Adaptation Scolaire et Sociale (GREASS), and is also vice-president of the Association Internationale de Formation et de Recherche en Éducation Familiale (AIFREF).

Mr. Terrisse began his presentation by distinguishing among two very different problems associated with illiteracy. The first relates to people who have been sufficiently educated but who, for a variety of reasons, have not achieved a functional level of reading and writing (literacy): young people with learning difficulties, young people with handicaps who lack the ability to learn how to read and write, school dropouts. Although not limited exclusively to the socioeconomically disadvantaged, this problem seems to arise frequently in this group. The second problem relates to people who have never been educated or have not been educated sufficiently due to a lack of resources. This may be the case of seniors or immigrants who did not have access to schools in their countries of origin:

In the former case prevention should be aimed generally at all learning and adjustment problems, in order to prevent failure (illiteracy in particular). In the latter case, education aims to prevent the problems of social and professional maladjustment associated with illiteracy. In both cases, prevention and literacy should be part of a more general approach.

In reality, prevention should be aimed at populations of the first type, primarily at children and their families. In certain situations, however, before, or at least while, working with children, we must first help mothers become literate. The transition from oral to written culture is another problem, as culture associated with poverty is, in large part, an oral culture.

In the case of low-literacy adults, the aim is “to prevent problems of social and professional maladjustment associated with illiteracy in societies that require functional written language skills.” For these populations, literacy training must be part of broader policies such as health, culture and employment.

Although children and youth are the main groups targeted, prevention measures should not be limited to schools: children spend 900 hours in schools, but 1 000 hours in other extracurricular settings,” with their family and friends, in recreational or cultural activities. It is important to work on needs before they become problems: “A need is a way in, but a difficulty is a closed door.” We must provide support and guidance during transitions (e.g. from one level to another, from one region to another) so that they do not lead to disengagement.

Thus prevention should be part of a comprehensive approach, one that requires the contribution of many different partners (families, schools and particularly the workplace) who should meet, listen to one another, exchange ideas and learn to work together in order to multiply “positive collateral effects.”

For more information, please see Appendix 12.

Presentation by H  l  ne Tremblay

Ms. Tremblay holds a master’s degree in project management. A consultant with the Direction de la formation g  n  rale des adultes at the Minist  re de l’  ducation, du Loisir et du Sport du Qu  bec, she is in charge of implementing the *Program to promote the return to school of people between the ages of 16 and 24*. She was the main architect in the design and implementation of the “Hand in Hand From A to Z!” project, which received the *Prix d’excellence 2000* for outstanding achievement.

Ms. Tremblay’s paper, which was presented by Fran  ois Blain, dealt with the history of illiteracy prevention in Qu  bec and the ecosystemic approach that was adopted in 2002 and is currently being implemented.

Before 1995, schools were adapted to their neighbourhoods, and prevention consisted in providing literacy training to parents in working-class communities. Between 1995 and 2002, illiteracy

prevention was formalized at the Ministère de l'Éducation by recognizing the importance of taking early action with young children and preventive intervention with families. Thus, prevention was integrated into the 1998 *Politique de la lecture et du livre* (policy on books and reading), which devoted a chapter to illiteracy prevention.

Since 2002, prevention has been included in the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*, and the government's anti-poverty plan. Prevention is therefore confirmed, and efforts have focused on two main courses of action:

- the development of an integrated approach to prevention, known as the ecosystemic approach
- experimentation with two programs: *Programme d'aide à l'éveil à la lecture et à l'écriture pour les 0 à 5 ans* (Emergent literacy program from birth to 5 years) and *Programme Famille, école, communauté: réussir ensemble pour les 2 à 12 ans* (Families, schools and communities succeeding together: program for 2- to 12-year-olds)

The ecosystemic approach is based on consistent, continuous interventions before, during and after school. These two aspects cannot occur without the integrated and coordinated contribution of all stakeholders, i.e. the family, classroom, school, and community, and the children or students themselves. All “systems” must work together to harmonize practices and bring about lasting changes. This approach must help specify and implement, in all environments, the prevention and protection factors that foster success. It is a positive approach. To be effective, all stakeholders must be mobilized within a territory that concerns them, to which they feel they belong. In this respect, the approach is also territorial.

The ecosystemic approach cannot succeed without sustained government, intersectorial and interministerial support.

Prospects for the future (2006-2009) include assessing the results of the two programs described above, as well as reinvesting knowledge and expertise, testing the integration of ministry programs and ensuring continued services for children and youth aged 0-24 in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

For more information, please see Appendix 13.

3.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

At the beginning of the discussions, the participants noted that the theme of the third plenary session should have been “preventing functional illiteracy.” Moreover, given the majority of comments, more positive terms should be used to describe ways of ensuring a smooth transition from oral to written culture. However, for certain participants, this positive attitude must not mask the situations or conditions that cause functional illiteracy and thus require preventive action.

Positive view of prevention

Regardless of the approach taken, participants seemed unanimous in the way they perceive the situation underlying illiteracy prevention and the challenge facing those who wish to change it. This view can be expressed in the following question: How can we ensure a smooth transition from oral to written culture, starting at an early age, as soon as education begins?

If the idea of transition from oral to written culture seems to somewhat devalue oral culture, it might perhaps be more appropriate to talk about integrating written culture into oral culture, as this emphasizes the complementary nature of these two modes of expression: "Written culture is, to a certain extent, a way of retaining oral culture." For literate populations, this complementarity is obvious, even if it can always be improved.

From this perspective, certain participants suggested adopting a positive vision and vocabulary when dealing with situations that require preventive action. Thus, it was proposed to "deal with education and training needs before they become problems of functional illiteracy."

Literacy must be viewed as the construction of meaning based on lifelong learning. Efforts cannot be limited to illiteracy prevention. This construction of meaning can vary depending on the living space: for example, there is a family literacy, a school literacy, but also a workplace literacy and a community literacy. In each living space, we must gradually create meaningful links with written culture. All of these spaces must communicate and interact with one another in a context of democracy in action. The mobilization of all target environments and training sites (be they formal, non-formal or informal) is essential.

All of the living spaces of an individual are the prime mediators between oral and written culture, of their integrated development sustained by the culture specific to each space. We must therefore intervene on all fronts, using oral culture and all of the environments and spaces that foster written culture. This is even more important in environments that are weakened by precarious social, economic and cultural conditions, as can be seen in situations of poverty, linguistic minority, where there is pressure to assimilate, and also in certain immigration contexts. In such cases, the support process must be strengthened by mediators from the community and buttressed by policies, measures and programs that respect local characteristics and dynamics.

Illiteracy prevention, or the integrated and continued development of oral and written culture, obviously concerns early childhood, as it is the foundation of this development. Indeed, written culture should be promoted before children even begin school, as it seems that the school cannot fill in for the family when written culture is given little or no importance.

However, adult populations also experience situations where they must reassess their relationship to written culture, as may happen when new information and communications technologies are introduced at work, when adults must learn to use a computer or search the Internet, or understand and guide their children's progress at school. This is an ongoing process that is part of literacy, itself a lifelong process.

Proposed actions

On the basis of the preceding analysis or some of its elements, the following suggestions were made. The basic ideas include:

- at the government level, planning concerted action coordinated through a single site
- using sites that are not associated with literacy and “detours” through different vital needs that might eventually lead to a demand for literacy training
- adopting a positive approach based on all of an individual’s and target population’s strengths; speaking of competency development and acquisition rather than the need to learn how to read, write and count
- developing school and municipal libraries and promoting their geographical and social accessibility; creating and fostering cooperation and concerted action among them
- avoiding preaching to parents; remembering that they are the first educators and that they have acquired many competencies, often through experience
- placing prevention and the continuous development of competencies (including those related to written culture) at the centre of a social project and the communities that comprise it: “If it takes a village to raise a child, someone in that village must coordinate efforts.” Although policies are essential, funding for activities in the field is just as important, if not more
- emphasizing the recognition of prior learning and competencies, particularly those competencies that were acquired through experience, in positive support measures, without relying too heavily on written information in order to reach populations that have serious difficulties with literacy
- creating knowledge exchange sites or communities, where literacy support is part of shared competencies
- in situations of poverty, acting on living conditions while dealing with literacy competencies, otherwise these competencies may not be meaningful because they are not motivating
- in cases where individuals belong to several communities, promoting mobility among them. The creation of interrelated communities must be promoted and supported
- paying attention to new modes of electronic communication and their effects on learning how to read and write



Chapter 4



Plenary Session 4

4. ILLITERACY, HEALTH AND POPULATION AGING

Recent surveys of adult literacy and skills have shown that low reading skills have significant negative repercussions on health. Not only is illiteracy a determinant of health, it is also closely tied to other socioeconomic conditions that impact it, such as income, social status, employment, social assistance, early childhood development, culture and gender relations.

The aging of the population is related to this issue, and the elderly must be encouraged to take charge of their health. Vulnerable populations, where there are more individuals with serious reading and writing problems, find it more difficult to manage their health, and often have no way to develop their ability to do so. The panellists for this plenary session were therefore invited to consider the following questions:

- According to the definition of illiteracy in your respective environments, what are the consequences of such a definition on how low-literacy persons manage their health and aging?
- How can we ensure that health information reaches low-literacy persons and that they understand the information?

Plenary session facilitator: Lino Mastriani

Mr. Mastriani holds an honours Bachelor's degree in administration (operational research). He has worked in various capacities at the Ministère du Revenu du Québec, Hydro-Québec and the MELs. He has taken different management courses and participated in literacy missions to France and Djibouti. Mr. Mastriani currently works for the Direction de la formation générale des adultes (DFGA) of the MELs, coordinating literacy services as well as the implementation of programs and services under the *Québec Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*, such as the *Programme de prévention de l'analphabétisme* (illiteracy prevention program), the reform of reception, referral, counselling and support services, the adaptation of training and instructional programs for young adults 16 to 24 years of age, training for prison inmates and training of First Nation persons.

4.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF

Presentation by Linda Shohet

Ms. Shohet is the founder and director of the Centre for Literacy of Quebec at Dawson College in Montréal. An independent organization that offers resources, research and professional development in literacy, the Centre is dedicated to increasing public understanding of the changing definition of literacy in a complex, technological society. In 2001, Ms. Shohet was part of a team of fifteen experts that advised the British Minister of Lifelong Learning prior to the launch of the UK National Strategy on Adult Literacy and Numeracy. In 2003, she participated in a study mission sponsored by the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec that visited five European countries examining adult education and continuing education and training policies. Since 1985, Ms. Shohet has edited *Literacy Across the CurriculumMedia Focus*, a bulletin that summarizes research and comments on policy and practice. Ms. Shohet has written extensively and given numerous talks on literacy and health. She is currently a member of the Expert Committee on Health Literacy, organized by the Canadian Public Health Association.

Following a brief presentation of the Centre for Literacy of Quebec, its vision and mission, Ms. Shohet explained the Centre's concept and definition of literacy:

Literacy is the ability to understand and use written information in everyday life, at home, at work and in the community, in order to achieve personal goals and build knowledge and skills. Individuals need to be able to continue to learn throughout their lives, engaging in a process that will enable them to read, write, make critical judgments and make decisions in order to develop within the community.

Literacy must enable individuals to understand and use generally accepted codes and symbols, including information and communications technologies.

The challenge in health literacy is great: terminology is generally highly specialized; few efforts are made to provide information in common, everyday terms; most health care recipients are elderly (aged 65 and over); and 80 per cent of them have low literacy skills (level 1 or level 2). Moreover, 95 per cent of health information is in printed form, and medical personnel are rarely trained to identify low-literacy adults and to communicate with them in plain, simple language. Their heavy workload does not allow them to take into account all of the barriers (including stress) that the health care system creates for weakened individuals.

From these observations and the experience of the Centre for Literacy of Quebec, Ms. Shohet developed a series of propositions to effectively integrate literacy and health:

- Take into account common codes used by communities or by different groups within communities; try to understand the difficulties that low-literacy individuals face and the methods

they use to understand health information and communicate with health care providers, through group interviews; test information materials aimed at low-literacy adults.

- Take into account the context in which health care is provided (e.g. prevention and protection, family health, occupational health, hospitalization, extended care).
- Adopt a positive view: build on people's skills and try to construct meaning in each life situation, particularly in health situations.
- Encourage seniors to participate in training, even if they do not tend to do so because of their age; use family strategies, as was done in the U.K.
- Identify the individuals and organizations who act, or can act, as mediators with populations that have difficulty accessing health information; support these individuals and organizations in their actions and provide training, if necessary.
- Simplify all forms of communication, be they oral or written.
- Support the creation of teams in health organizations to assess pamphlets and other written materials and rewrite them in plain language.
- Develop other formats besides print (e.g. audiotapes, videos, cartoons, pictograms).
- Take into account cultural symbols when adapting information tools.
- Adapt internal research.
- Mediate the use of the Internet in health matters, particularly among the elderly.
- Examine and determine the cost of illiteracy on the health care system and the benefits of literacy.
- Continue the implementation of pilot projects and integrate conclusive results into permanent, universal policies.

For more information, please see Appendix 14.

Presentation by Scott Murray

Mr. Murray is currently director, responsible for education system results, of the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Program (LAMP) at the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. He has specialized in the design and conduct of large-scale surveys to meet emerging public policy issues, in particular international comparative work in the area of the assessment of adult skill and participation in adult education and training. Mr. Murray was the international study director for the International Adult Literacy Survey.

Mr. Murray began his presentation by describing the work that the UNESCO Institute for Statistics is doing on health literacy, which, according to the Institute, is defined as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”

To establish the conceptual framework that is used to measure health literacy levels, six sectors of activity were chosen: 1) health promotion 2) health protection 3) disease prevention 4) health care 5) health maintenance and 6) systems navigation (i.e. finding one's way in the health care system).

For each of these sectors, health-related activities were selected to create a health activities literacy scale. This served as the basis for establishing the percentage of the population at each health literacy skill level, by age group, province of residence, education level and gender, all of which were compared to results obtained in the United States.

In Canada, 60 per cent of the population scored at level 1 or level 2 in health literacy. In concrete terms, this means that these individuals have serious difficulties obtaining and processing information that could allow them to meet their needs and solve health problems. They therefore live in a state of dependence as to the numerous decisions they must make to manage their health. The lack of information can also put them at risk, particularly when they use medication. In some cases, the stress experienced by people who have difficulty understanding information and communicating with medical personnel can aggravate or even cause certain conditions, particularly conditions related to the nervous system.

All of these difficulties have direct effects not only on health costs, but on the quality of interventions, in terms of both disease prevention and the provision of care.

Mr. Murray concluded his presentation with the following statements:

- Health literacy can be measured in a valid, reliable, comparable and easily interpreted way.
- Health literacy levels vary from one socioeconomic group to another; they vary even more significantly than levels of education.
- Differences in health literacy levels are related to economic, social and educational differences in the populations studied.

For more information, please see Appendix 15.

Presentation by Marg Rose

Ms. Rose currently works for the University of Victoria in British Columbia. In addition, she is completing her master's thesis on public health and adult literacy. She has given workshops to employees in various regions of Manitoba. She was the executive director of the provincial coalition Literacy Partners of Manitoba and a member of Canadian literacy organizations for eight years.

After providing a brief history of health literacy in Canada, Ms. Rose went over the main definitions and concepts used in the field:

- Literacy: A complex set of abilities to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture for personal and community development. (Centre for Literacy of Quebec, 2000)
- Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. (Statistics Canada, 2005)

- Health literacy: The cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain success, to understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health. (Kickbusch and Nutbeam, 1998)
- The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. (I.O.M., 2005)

Based on these definitions, which emphasize the independence and development of individuals and communities, particularly in matters of health, Ms. Rose focused on the difficulties that low-literacy individuals face in navigating the current health care system and in taking full advantage of the services and care offered. For example, low-literacy persons may take medication incorrectly because they cannot read medication labels properly, they may have trouble regulating their level of insulin if they have diabetes, they may not obtain the information they need for their illness or condition, they may feel stressed because they have problems understanding medical terminology and are afraid they will be identified as low-literate or undereducated. Such difficulties are often compounded by the numerous effects of poverty often associated with illiteracy.

In closing, Ms. Rose listed some of main issues surrounding the development of health literacy in Canada, such as increasing research, which is still limited; taking into account various contexts in literacy programs and practices; strengthening ties between health care workers and literacy workers; and last but not least, developing health literacy as a special field in the health sector.

For more information, please see Appendix 16.

Presentation by Margot Kaszap

Ms. Kaszap is an associate professor in human science didactics and specialist in qualitative methodology at the Université Laval. Since 1996, she has worked with the literacy and health research group “Alpha-santé,” which has conducted a variety of research projects. In 2001, she took part in a project to assess needs related to the development of literacy and health research in Canada. She is currently taking part in a pan-Canadian evaluation project, the Canadian Public Health Association’s National Literacy and Health Program. She was also a guest professor in 2003 and 2005 at the Summer Institute on Literacy and Health Research at the University of Victoria and has published various works on health and literacy.

Ms. Kaszap began by stating and demonstrating that literacy is, first and foremost, a social practice:

- Literacy is related to the broad context in which people live and deal with their hopes and needs. (Barton, 2000)
- Like all human activities, literacy is basically social in nature and is situated in the interactions between people. (Barton, 1998, 2000)

Literacy is an activity situated in the space between thought and a text, which is generally a social product. The space in question is a relational space, which, in the case of health, exists between an individual and a health professional and is mediated by different contexts that often determine it. Poverty and social exclusion greatly affect the nature and quality of this relationship. However, Ms. Kaszap specified, citing Barré and Lété (1997), “poor literacy skills do not cause social exclusion—they are a consequence of it, not the other way around.”

Ms. Kaszap also added:

Health literacy is a health-related skill that all individuals need in order to find, understand, evaluate and convey health information with a view to improving their own health and that of their family, and stay healthy throughout their lives. (Rootman, Kaszap et al., 2005).

Many researchers have established a connection between low literacy and negative effects on health, such as cancer; higher-than-normal rates of disease, accidents and death; poor physical and psychosocial health; and higher health costs. These effects are associated with risk factors including smoking, drinking, sedentary lifestyle and poor diet. Moreover, it has been shown (Summer, 1991) that training, even when adapted to a particular target group, has little effect on behaviour, at least in the short term: “People find it very difficult to alter their everyday habits.”

According to Ms. Kaszap, 80 per cent of seniors in Canada need help to understand everyday information, and 53 per cent have level 1 literacy skills (the lowest level). A gap therefore exists between low-literacy seniors and the health care system, between the dearth of tools low-literacy seniors use to obtain information, understand health terminology and make decisions regarding illness prevention and care, and the complexity of the health care system, the specialized language it uses and the lack of time that professionals spend with patients.

To bridge this gap, Ms. Kaszap listed some possible actions, such as using plain language in information pamphlets, on consent forms, medication labels, etc.; watching out for bad translations; using fonts that can be read more easily by people with poor eyesight; using forms of communication other than print, particularly images; processing information from Web sites; providing search and evaluation guides; promoting guidance and mediation.

In terms of organization, interdisciplinary groups should be created to share best practices and conduct more research, raise awareness and train all staff in the health care system regarding the needs and difficulties of low-literacy individuals.

For more information, please see Appendix 17.

Presentation by Robert Sarginson

Mr. Sarginson is a past regional programming coordinator for Literacy Partners of Manitoba and is currently project director. He was a public school teacher for 30 years and is the author of *Literacy and Health: A Manitoba Perspective*.

Mr. Sarginson presented the broad outlines of the state of literacy in Manitoba. The situation of populations in northern Manitoba and in rural areas clearly differs from that in other regions and urban centres. In the northern part of the province, 25 per cent of the population has less than a grade nine education, compared with 12 per cent in central Manitoba. There are 50 000 people scattered throughout a vast territory in the north, while 250 000 people live in rural areas. The majority of those who have completed grade 9 are actually more at a grade 7 level. This situation has major implications for health. Not only are these populations far from health services in geographic terms, but also in terms of their ability to understand the jargon used by these services. However, as Mr. Sarginson reminded his audience, these populations are still expected to take charge of their health.

A study of 160 medical information pamphlets revealed that all were written in language that is incomprehensible to people with level 1 or level 2 literacy skills. Given the enormous pressure that population aging is placing on the health care system, health care workers have less and less time to listen, and provide information and explanations to patients. Normally, all documents should be legible and understandable to anyone who uses them.

While describing the work of Literacy Partners of Manitoba, particularly in the northern part of the province where health problems are magnified by distance to services (e.g. patients are transported by helicopter), unsanitary conditions (e.g. lack of potable drinking water) and precarious economic situations, Mr. Sarginson discussed a number of actions that should be implemented:

- Increase remote-access to health-related information, particularly through the Internet.
- Rewrite all complicated written materials in plain language.
- Use forms of communication other than print.
- Work with literacy groups on health-related problems experienced by target populations: help individuals prepare for a doctor's visit and identify and name symptoms; review as a group the types of exchanges that take place during a consultation; consult health-related Web sites together.
- Take into account the cultural differences of communities, and adapt the language used to their communication code.
- Increase cooperation with the health care system, in particular with medical professionals; raise awareness among different staff members regarding low-literacy individuals; and provide training, if necessary.

4.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

The participants began the discussions by pointing out the close ties that exist between poverty and low literacy skills, particularly in relation to health.

Consequences of low health literacy

Throughout the discussions, it was shown that mastery of common codes and symbols, including those related to information and communications technologies, is essential if individuals are to manage their health. Low-literate individuals must be able to critically assess various types of information sources, some of which are subject to excessive marketing, even quackery. They must also acquire the competencies that are considered necessary in order to obtain, understand and evaluate information, on the one hand, and to convey information about one's health and symptoms and ask questions in a prompt and timely manner, on the other.

Moreover, reading and writing difficulties can aggravate a person's lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. Literacy must therefore be presented in a positive way, based on very concrete needs and interests and on existing competencies that can help individuals take control of their health and their entire lives, once again, making lifelong learning a habit is essential.

The consequences of low literacy are magnified by the fact that the population is aging and that gains in longevity do not necessarily translate into better quality of life. According to IALSS 2003, more than 80 per cent of seniors scored at level 1 or level 2 in literacy skills and have serious difficulties obtaining the health services they need. This situation is all the more worrisome given that skills are generally known to decline as people age.

Low-literacy individuals therefore face a number of obstacles in managing their health, such as:

- the sheer complexity, tremendous volume and variety of health information available on medication labels, in medical journals or on Web sites, for example
- the publication of information that does not take into account its intended audience, particularly low-literate populations
- an overreliance on print and written materials. Other means of communication, such as audiotapes or videos, might be more accessible to individuals who have difficulty reading and writing
- the distance between service recipients and health professionals (on many levels) may be amplified by budget cuts, particularly personnel cuts, that reduce the amount of time health care workers spend with patients

Proposed actions and interventions

To counter the effects of low health literacy skills, several methods were proposed and discussed during the session. They are described below, although no distinction has been made between the methods that have already been tried and those that could eventually be tested:

- Match actions to target populations (e.g. the elderly, cultural communities, populations in remote areas) and the various environments (e.g. family, workplace, health centres).
- Tailor the approach to the expression of educational demand in order to reach all target populations, listen to what they have to say, understand their situation and their needs, help bridge the gap between health information and reading and writing abilities, and eventually support the development of these abilities.
- Work continuously with health service recipients, particularly to adapt health information: for example, test and evaluate information materials before making them available.
- Include target groups in research projects, not only as sources of information but also as consultants to guide the research.
- Bring together health recipients and stakeholders to look for solutions to problems stemming from low literacy; break down the barriers between recipients and health care personnel.
- Ensure cooperation between health researchers and practitioners, particularly when looking for internal solutions.
- Make health care personnel aware of the difficulties faced by low-literacy individuals and train them to take these difficulties into account in their practices.
- Promote closer ties between health care personnel and literacy providers; support common projects.
- Make information accessible: identify target populations, adapt the language level to their modes of expression and communication (e.g. plain language, font size), diversify the methods of communication (e.g. audio, video, illustrations).
- Process the multitude of information to be transmitted according to the different sources and target groups; develop guides; organize mediation with key individuals and organizations from different environments.
- Pursue and intensify research on the costs of illiteracy and the benefits of literacy in relation to health, in order to provide information to decision-makers.
- When designing literacy policies and programs, take into account the links between literacy and health, include these concerns when implementing health programs and services.



Chapter 5



Plenary Session 5

5. MOBILIZATION OF READING AND WRITING COMPETENCIES

The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, CONFINTEA V (1997), highlighted the importance of “creating an educational environment supporting all forms of learning.”¹⁰

As Rachel Bélisle noted:

If we recognize that adults with low literacy skills read outside of a formal education setting or literacy process, then we can plan ways to collectively support this reading in order to maintain their reading skills or [...] promote the mobilization and reinforcement of the skills that involve reading.¹¹

In light of these statements, the panellists were asked the following questions during this plenary session:

- If we consider literacy to be a social practice that is part of a social context, how can we take into account the reading skills and practices of low-literate adults in the different areas of literacy development?
- According to what we know of the competencies of adults with low literacy skills, how can these competencies be maintained for active citizenship, in the adult and continuous education policies, in action plans, and in best practice?

Plenary session facilitator: Diane Charest

Ms. Charest is head of the Direction de la recherche, des statistiques et des indicateurs (DRSI), the research department at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) of Québec. Her department is responsible for ensuring that prospective and evaluative research is conducted for the purpose of guiding the education system. More specifically, in recent years she has supervised various projects on the workplace integration of young people without a diploma as well as on the characteristics of adults with low education levels and the training that is available to them. She has also participated in a steering committee set up by the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey to analyze Québec data from the survey.

10. CONFINTEA, Adult Education, *The Hamburg Declaration: The Agenda for the Future* (July 1997).

11. Rachel Bélisle, *Compétences et pratiques de lecture d'adultes non diplômés: conditions et principes d'un environnement écrit participatif*, research report (Sherbrooke: Université de Sherbrooke, 2006).

5.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF

Presentation by Rachel Bélisle

Ms. Bélisle is a professor in the guidance department of the faculty of education at the Université de Sherbrooke, and a member of the Équipe de recherche sur les transitions et l'apprentissage (ÉRTA). She holds a Ph.D. in education, and her research work focuses on support practices for young persons and adults without a diploma, in particular practices and uses of written text in social and sociovocational integration settings as well as the recognition of prior learning and competencies. With Sylvain Bourdon, she edited a collective work entitled *Pratiques et apprentissage de l'écrit dans les sociétés éducatives* (Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006). In collaboration with Olivier Dezutter, she co-wrote the research report prepared for the MELS, *Compétences et pratiques de lecture d'adultes non diplômés: conditions et principes d'un environnement écrit participatif* (2006).

Ms. Bélisle began her presentation by stating that, according to several qualitative studies in North America and Europe, adults with low education levels use a variety of writing practices in their personal, family, working and citizen lives. The question that arises is how to maintain these acquired skills and competencies and use them as a springboard to strengthen the level of literacy of low-literate adults without a diploma. The issue is therefore one of post-literacy.

In the recent research project conducted for the MELS in 2006, Ms. Bélisle suggested a model for understanding the literacy environment of adults without a diploma and helping us reflect on the ethnocentrism behind the discourse associated with literacy and illiteracy. Learning to read and write is a learning opportunity and is closely tied to the recognition of prior learning and competencies. Ms. Bélisle's research focused on the writing practices of adults who are employed or in workplace integration programs.

Ms. Bélisle then suggested reviewing Article 27 of the Hamburg Declaration's *Agenda for the Future*, which calls for the enrichment of literacy environments, and identifying the basic postulates of an ecological approach in order to study writing practices. The model suggested takes into account the issues of power at the heart of practices and the relationships they presuppose. According to the resulting model, the literacy environment of adults without a diploma has four points of entry, depending on whether the environment fosters participation or distantiation, and on whether the reading and writing situations are open or regulated. Further research should be conducted specifically on literacy environments that encourage participation in order to learn more about writing practices in this kind of context and to create and test new environments.

Lastly, Ms. Bélisle brought up for discussion a proposal for collective action supported by the State. This approach would support the participation of adults without a diploma in a writing environment that would allow them to mobilize and strengthen their reading and writing skills. The approach would be based on the importance of not dissociating reading and writing; of enhancing the value of ordinary, everyday reading and writing activities; of recognizing and encouraging current practices of the many social actors who, sometimes without realizing it, contribute to the mobilization of writing

skills of adults without a diploma; of building an exchange network for the recognition of prior learning; of creating new spaces for reading and writing support as well as for building bridges between practice settings and education and training networks.

For more information, please see Appendix 18.

Presentation by Michèle Minne

Ms. Minne is head of the literacy sector, and secretary for the steering committee at the continuing education department (Cultural Branch) of Belgium's Ministère de la Communauté française.

Based on the experience of the cultural branch of the Ministère de la Communauté française, which, since 1970, has been interested in the links between literacy and culture, Ms. Minne asked the following question: "What if culture turned out to be the best way of mobilizing reading and writing skills?" In her presentation, Ms. Minne basically set out to show the vast potential that culture has to "encourage learners to become involved in the process of learning to read and write—a process that can often be particularly difficult when one learns how to read and write as an adult."

If cultural activities can be used to promote the mobilization of adults' reading and writing skills, they can also be used to experiment with other modes of expression that are less problematic for adults, since they do not involve the written word. Cultural activities can therefore serve to place adults in situations that promote success and make it easier for adults to become active citizens as they incorporate culture into their lives.

From this perspective, Ms. Minne believes it is essential to have a comprehensive approach to literacy training designed not simply to transmit basic knowledge, but from a broader standpoint, to stimulate the critical thinking process, to allow a person to exercise his or her fundamental rights as a citizen, and to trigger actions conducive to individual and collective emancipation.

Although these artistic practices have not yet been studied systematically and funding has not yet been allocated specifically for this type of project, experience is accumulating, particularly within a network of centres for expression and creativity (CECs), led by moderator-artists and designed specifically for specific audiences, including vulnerable groups of people. Ms. Minne emphasized the great interest shown in the collaborative work undertaken by literacy providers and the moderator-artists and the importance of publishing the artistic productions, or at least of exhibiting them in the community.

Ms. Minne then described many examples of activities in various cultural areas (visual art, painting, sculpture, theatre, writing, animation, photography) and settings (libraries, museums and other cultural centres): "May the literacy training process be an opportunity to open up the minds of learners, allowing them to cultivate a secret garden and enjoy the pleasure of artistic creation."

For more information, please see Appendix 19.

Presentation by Isabelle Clerc

Ms. Clerc is a professor at the information and communications department at the Université Laval, in Québec City, where she teaches professional writing. She manages the Groupe Rédiger, which is associated with the Centre interdisciplinaire de recherches sur les activités langagières (CIRAL). Her work focuses primarily on simplifying communication and on effective writing.

Ms. Clerc began her presentation by mentioning some of the findings of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), which showed that a large portion of the Canadian population has serious difficulties with literacy, even though “the written word is used more than ever—more, in fact, than before its supposed decline.” While the government publishes millions of documents every year, for example, a great number of individuals lack the skills to read them. Communications tools and messages must therefore be adapted; but how?

The government has two choices: it can increase basic reading and writing skills through continuing education and training, or it can reduce the level of complexity of its publications. Both courses of action should be undertaken at the same time. Accordingly, the government has taken this into account in the *Public Administration Act* (2000) and in the *Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (2002). It has also asked the Groupe Rédiger of the Université Laval to work on simplifying government publications, by analyzing the different types of documents written for the general public and developing tools that would help writers adjust their texts to their target audience.

In order to reduce the level of complexity of a document, it is necessary, among other things, to understand the different types of readers, their reading strategies, the writing context and constraints. It is also important to take into account a series of other factors that affect the target audience, the writers and the message itself, as well as communication modes.

Converting a high-literacy text into a level 2 text, for example, not only makes a text more accessible to low-literate individuals, but it mobilizes, maintains and develops their competencies while allowing them to play an active role in society.

Ms. Clerc then described the work done by the Groupe Rédiger (an analysis of some 1 600 documents; consultations of 150 individuals; meetings with approximately 100 intermediaries or mediators, and document writers and producers) and presented the result of this research, a guide entitled *De la lettre à la page Web: savoir communiquer avec le grand public*.

For more information, please see Appendix 20.

Presentation by Maren Elfert

Ms. Elfert is a public relations/program specialist for the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg, an international centre for research, information and documentation that is devoted to adult education and training and lifelong learning.

In her presentation, Ms. Elfert focused mainly on family literacy in a number of African, Asian, and European countries, namely Senegal, India, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland and France.

Based on numerous experiences, Ms. Elfert answered the basic question of this plenary session:

- According to what we know of the competencies of adults with low literacy skills, how can these competencies be maintained for active citizenship, in the adult and continuous education policies, in action plans, and in best practice?

To this end, it is essential to:

- create multilingual written environments, particularly in Africa, where each country has several ethnic groups and languages. In Senegal, for instance, there are 22 different groups and languages. Since 1990, the Associates on Research and Education for Development (ARED) has published books in six national languages, mostly in Pulaar, the language spoken by over 25 million people
- develop books written by and for low-literacy adults. Once again, in Senegal, adults are learning to read and write while writing their personal stories
- integrate reading and writing practices into cultural projects that are less structured than school and more motivating
- concentrate on key competencies, as in the DeSeCo Project that defines the minimum skills or competencies required to function effectively in society
- diversify methods used to mobilize the competencies of low-literacy adults so that these competencies remain active and are developed in a citizen-centred perspective. For example, develop educational television and Internet-based distance education on current writing practices, two methods that offer the advantage of anonymity
- use family literacy in particular, because it meets a basic need in parents, and in so doing, fosters the mobilization and development of competencies in the home

In closing, Ms. Elfert reminded the audience of the upcoming Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in 2009.

For more information, please see Appendix 21.

5.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

Referring to Article 27 of the Hamburg Declaration's *Agenda for the Future* (1997) and to Rachel Bélisle's presentation, discussions of the fifth plenary session focused mostly on the various environments and places where reading and writing skills are practiced outside of formal settings, and on possible methods of mobilizing, maintaining and strengthening these skills and competencies.

Environments conducive to reading and writing practices

From the start, it was recognized and established that low-literacy adults adopt a range of reading and writing practices, however limited and infrequent they may be. These practices take place in a variety of environments, which together create situations that can help maintain and develop literacy skills.

From this, the following questions were raised:

- How can reading and writing practices and competencies be recognized, maintained and developed in low-literacy individuals?
- How can we ensure collaboration and transfer between formal, informal and non-formal environments that are conducive to reading and writing skills?
- How can we foster the creation of new environments and situations that promote the mobilization and reinforcement of reading and writing competencies?

Participants questioned the volume and frequency of practices that correspond to the four categories of Ms. Bélisle's analytical model, particularly the existence of open practices resulting from distantiation. It was specified that this qualitative research is ethnographic and that the categories of open practices based on participation are specifically targeted in this case, given the population studied, i.e. low-literacy adults. Moreover, interest was also shown in informal practices centred on human relations, as well as in oral communication used to mediate written information.

Participants also wondered whether it would be possible to establish cooperative practices in the workplace, where production rates require information to be processed rapidly. Research should help elucidate this situation, as it gathers information on various environments and situations conducive to reading and writing practices.

As for the building of bridges between the non-formal, informal and formal practices of training networks, much needs to be done, since a "silo mentality" tends to prevail and little work is being done in networks. A network approach could be integrated into existing partnerships if we agree to recognize and consider the literacy practices and competencies of low-literate individuals. The recognition of prior learning therefore constitutes one of the main bridges to be established. However, it must be accepted that this kind of approach takes time to construct and must be part of a continuum that will allow each person to understand his or her relationship to the written word.

Participants deplored the fact that research in adult education receives so little support, especially financial support. Referring to the presentations by Ms. Minne and Ms. Elfert, participants discussed the benefits of culture in the mobilization of reading and writing competencies, since it calls upon a variety of competencies simultaneously, depending on the mode of cultural expression. Reading and writing competencies exist side by side with those related to oral, physical or visual modes of expression. In terms of self-esteem, the difficulties associated with reading and writing are compensated by competencies acquired through other modes of expression. These competencies can be used to help individuals mobilize their existing literacy competencies.

It is therefore essential not only to bring together cultural animators and literacy trainers, but to provide them with common professional development. We must encourage them to cooperate and work together in order to maximize efforts of each sector. This may even prove to be an effective way to establish links, or even bridges, between non-formal, informal and formal settings. Examples of initiatives in Belgium and Québec have confirmed these ideas.

Following Ms. Clerc's presentation, several examples were cited to illustrate the work that remains to be done in the public sector so that the reading and writing competencies of low-literacy individuals are taken into account. In this regard, all government publications should serve to mobilize reading and writing competencies.

Proposed actions

In the discussion that followed, participants brought up several examples that underscore the particular problems stemming from administrative jargon, or "administratese." For example, 75 per cent of adults who enrolled in one particular training centre did so not because they had read about it in pamphlets or newspapers, but because they had heard about it through family and friends. It was also noted that once application forms for old age security pensions had been simplified, requests for benefits increased significantly. What these examples illustrate is the need to use plain language in written documents, and the importance of relying on family and/or significant persons and on the information to be given verbally. We should also support the production of materials written by and for low-literacy individuals and make greater use of peer training.

What people want are plain language writing guides as well as wider distribution of such guides, if they already exist. Participants would also like to see writing environments increase and develop from situations and settings in which low-literacy individuals are already called upon to read and write. Several European initiatives make use of television, distance education and the Internet, as is the case in the United Kingdom, with its Family Literacy program and in Alberta, which promotes the mobilization of competencies not only among children and teachers, but also among parents and others in the community.

For immigrants, the ideal situation would be to create an environment that not only respects the expression and development of their native language, but also promotes the acquisition of a second language, in order to support their integration into the host country.

Literacy is often hidden behind important social needs that must be identified and met by working together with the individuals and populations that experience them.

In closing, participants emphasized the following:

- the importance of developing and enhancing the value of existing participatory environments, of creating settings accessible to new readers
- the fact that, in literacy, learning how to read is no longer considered an absolute prerequisite for the acquisition of other competencies; we must integrate oral and written culture, and must promote existing competencies rather than fight illiteracy
- the need to help individuals acquire self-confidence so that they can develop the desire to learn
- the unique position of culture in literacy, because culture is closely tied to the search for identity and the ability to visualize the future and thus to grow and develop



Chapter 6



Plenary Session 6

6. GOVERNMENT POLICIES, ORIENTATIONS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH LITERACY

In Québec, two key observations led to the development of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*: the need to clarify the orientations of Québec society in this matter and the need to establish a culture of lifelong learning in Québec. It is therefore “a government policy and a policy of partnership that sets out a mobilizing collective endeavour based on the renewal and strengthening of the synergy among all of the players in lifelong learning.”¹² A five-year action plan (2002-2007) accompanies this policy. It includes the government's commitments to lifelong learning and specifies the objectives to be achieved, in particular with respect to increasing the level of basic education. One of the action plan's orientations is the need to meet the major challenge of adult education and continuing education and training, thus providing the basis for lifelong learning. Meeting this challenge demands a variety of actions geared to the difficulties faced by people with low literacy skills. “Aggressive action to eradicate illiteracy is a priority.” “We must invest the time and energy to develop new ways to convince more adults to complete their basic education.”¹³

The following questions were addressed during the plenary session:

- Do the government policies, action plans and orientations associated with literacy, adult education and continuing education and training reflect the definitions of literacy? How are action plans implemented?
- What opportunities for complementarity exist with the government policies related to health, culture, the environment, the status of women, etc.? What partnerships need to be established?

Plenary session facilitator: Lorraine Séguin

Ms. Séguin is a consulting analyst for labour market policies for the training sector at the Direction générale des politiques of the Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale. She was actively involved in the development of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* and currently ensures that her ministry adheres to the policy.

12. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002) v.

13. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Action Plan for Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002) 4.

6.1. THE PRESENTATIONS IN BRIEF

Presentation by Michèle Stanton-Jean

Ms. Stanton-Jean is chair of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. She was appointed special advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Health and Social Affairs) and was assigned to the Permanent Mission of Canada to the European Union in Brussels from 1998 to 2000. In September 2000, she became program development advisor for the faculty of higher education at the Université de Montréal. From 1993 to 1998, she served as Deputy Minister, Health Canada. Ms. Stanton-Jean is the author of several books and publications, including *L'Histoire des femmes au Québec de la Nouvelle-France à nos jours*. She was chair of the Commission d'étude sur la formation des adultes, which produced the report *Apprendre: une action volontaire et responsable*. Ms. Stanton-Jean has participated in numerous international meetings and working groups on labour market training, adult education, health and aging, in Argentina, France and other European countries, China and Canada.

Echoing the thoughts of the Director General for UNESCO, Ms. Stanton-Jean began her presentation by noting that much remains to be done to eliminate illiteracy. Although recognized as one of the most potent tools in development, “a source of freedom” for individuals and development for societies, literacy is often treated with “relative neglect,” which is all the more frustrating to observe.

Ms. Stanton-Jean then continued: “It is obvious that government policies have not succeeded in eradicating the scourge of illiteracy.” Apparently, there are 771 million adults worldwide who live “without the assets engendered by basic literacy, and two-thirds of these adults are women.” Moreover, low-literacy adults participate in education and training at a rate that is considerably lower than educated adults.

According to Ms. Stanton-Jean, to rectify the situation, determined political will is essential. That is why politicians must be sensitized and educated about the economic and social issues and challenges associated with illiteracy and functional illiteracy. The objectives of the 1960s are still valid: “the right to lifelong education, recognition of prior learning, educational leave, alternatives to school-based learning, methods adapted to sociocultural realities.”

We must also set up functional partnerships where information is shared, relationships are transparent, and people listen to what others have to say. We must stop working in isolation, bring policy makers and policy implementers closer together, create partnerships among the various stakeholders, connect research to practice, and disseminate knowledge.

In closing, Ms Stanton-Jean reminded her audience that, with 192 member countries, UNESCO remains a major force in the development of literacy, along with education and lifelong learning. She reiterated the invitation to attend the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in 2009.

For more information, please see Appendix 22.

Presentation by Marie-Thérèse Geffroy

Ms. Geffroy is director of the Agence Nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme (ANLCI) in France. She is president of the French committee for the WorldSkills Competition and vice-president of WorldSkills International. She is a member of the Haut conseil de l'école and participated in the Commission Nationale du débat sur l'avenir de l'école. She also chaired the Comité de coordination des programmes régionaux d'apprentissage et de formation professionnelle continue. She holds a master's degree in classical language and literature and is the author of *L'illettrisme: Mieux comprendre pour mieux agir* (Éditions Milan).

In her presentation, Ms. Geffroy described ANLCI as “a public interest group working together to fight illiteracy” whose motto “United in order to act more effectively” is befitting, given ANLCI's varied structure and composition.

Board members of ANLCI include, among others, representatives from various ministries, employers' associations, unions, corporations, regional and local communities. There is also an advisory committee consisting of members from 150 associations and popular education movements, a scientific and evaluation committee of researchers, and an operational team of regional and national coordinators.

The aim is to mobilize all actors at all levels in order to ensure a shared vision and policy. ANLCI's first challenge was to define this vision and policy in clear, simple terms, with guiding principles and an action plan for each ministry and sector.

According to Ms. Geffroy, partnership is the foundation of any initiative to combat illiteracy. Each partner has “to assume his or her share in a common action.” Partnership must also be established among the various ministries. By way of example, Ms. Geffroy described the cultural ministry's role:

Thanks to partnerships with cultural organizations, groups of individuals have become familiar with their cultural community and begun frequenting places that they previously felt were not meant for them. By going to museums and libraries, these individuals have found the confidence and self-esteem they needed to rediscover the desire and will to learn.

The priorities for 2006-2008 include continuing to measure the situation in order to better target interventions, organizing regional plans to combat illiteracy and improving their quality by giving organizations the tools they need. To this end, the *Forum permanent des pratiques* allows specialists and resource persons from all walks of life to “capitalize, exchange, transfer, share and work together more effectively.” Thus, ANLCI now has a combined force of some 900 literacy providers who are sharing 80 best practices.

Ms. Geffroy concluded her presentation by stating that it is up to each of us to reach out to others and work with them to bring cultural and training organizations closer together.

For more information, please see Appendix 23.

Presentation by Michèle Minne

Ms. Minne is head of the literacy sector, and secretary for the steering committee at the continuing education department (Cultural Branch) of Belgium's Ministère de la Communauté française.

Ms. Minne began her speech by reminding participants that Belgium is made up of three linguistic communities, each of which has its own government. In the French community, the literacy sector consists of an association of various government-recognized literacy providers and approaches. The coordinating organization *Lire et écrire* plays a supporting role in this associative sector, developing and promoting literacy initiatives. Its mandate includes training the trainers, raising awareness and conducting research.

There are currently 310 literacy providers in all, including 219 associations, 73 social advancement schools and 18 community stakeholders. These providers come from many sectors: continuing education associations, sociovocational integration organizations, social action associations, cultural associations, social advancement schools and other local authority structures such as public social assistance centres.

In 2004-2005, some 16 000 learners/participants/trainees/students (the terminology used depends on the intervention sector) took part in training activities, 92 per cent of whom were trained in the associative sector.

All of the literacy policies are coordinated by the steering committee of the continuing education department, whose members work in various administrative departments and the associative sector. The committee's mission is:

To produce an annual survey of the situation, provide data on the number of learners, and submit proposals to the appropriate ministers with a view to supporting illiterate individuals and their personal plans, and coordinating the literacy policies introduced by the different sectors.

Ms. Minne concluded her presentation by emphasizing the importance of listening to stakeholders at all levels. Not only must we listen to individuals, trainers and associations, but their concerns must be heard by the decision-makers. We must always listen before we act.

For more information, please see Appendix 24.

Presentation by Robert Nolet

Mr. Nolet holds a Bachelor's degree in industrial relations from the Université Laval and a certificate in adult education and in school administration from the Université de Sherbrooke. He is assistant director of the Centre Louis-Jolliet, an adult education centre at the Commission scolaire de la Capitale in Québec City, where he is responsible for developing partnership agreements with community organizations, businesses and government partners. He is also in charge of orientation, literacy and Secondary Cycle One services. In 1993, Mr. Nolet coordinated and participated in a study on the educational services offered by school boards to adults taking part in a remedial program, for the Direction de la formation générale des adultes of the Ministère de l'Éducation. In 1998, he directed a research study analyzing the situation of immigrants enrolled in adult general education throughout Québec. Mr. Nolet contributed to designing the History of Québec and Canada program used in adult education between 1989 and 1997, and is the author of several history and mathematics textbooks. He was also on the first team responsible for the curriculum reform in basic general education, sharing his expertise in developing the "citizenship" competency as well as a first version of a reference framework for competency levels, which served as the basis for this work.

Based on his experience as an educator and administrator of an adult education centre, Mr. Nolet reflected on the conditions that need to be created in order to ensure a coherent, dynamic relationship between government policies and local initiatives in matters of literacy and common-core basic education.

Without local initiatives and intervention, even the best policies will fail to meet the specific needs of all those who come through the doors of adult education centres. Although government policies help choose and define orientations in a given sector, they must also provide the support required for effective local action.

After analyzing the causes for the Centre's plummeting enrollments in basic education from 1993 to 2000 (when enrollments dropped from 6 098 to 1 877), Mr. Nolet identified a series of conditions that are needed to ensure the ongoing development of literacy and basic education services:

- Develop partnerships between ministries and coordinate intervention policies, programs and practices with local authorities, particularly between ministries concerned with education and with employment, labour force and social solidarity development.
- Recognize the importance of and responsibilities associated with local initiatives and provide the necessary space and means for reflection.
- Avoid drastic changes in support, which, as was the case with local literacy initiatives, led to the isolation and social exclusion of many clients and a loss of expertise and dynamic young trainers in adult education.
- Promote and support partnerships between local or regional organizations run by ministries, on the one hand, and adult education centres and a significant number of community groups and different partners in the fields of social and sociovocational integration, on the other.
- Restore open access and financial support to basic education.

- Stop working in isolation: integrate various fields of intervention, ensure curricular continuity and promote synergy between groups and training establishments (the Centre Louis-Jolliet has 38 off-site locations, many in community organizations with whom the Centre has signed partnership agreements).
- Avoid overspecialized interventions and recognize that, for many people, a training plan can only result from a personal plan.

According to Mr. Nolet, without vertical and horizontal partnerships (also known as networks), we end up with co-errance rather than coherence.

For more information, please see Appendix 25.

6.2. SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS

In answer to the questions addressed at the start of the sixth plenary session, panellists considered government policies and action plans associated with literacy and examined the opportunities for complementarity and partnerships in accordance with their vision of literacy. The results of these discussions are briefly described below.

Sensitizing and mobilizing politicians

Politicians must be made aware of new research in order to fully understand the situation and its related issues. Despite their political role, politicians, like many other people, are not always aware of the problems caused by low literacy or poverty. Continued information and awareness campaigns are therefore indispensable, particularly given the high turnover rate among politicians in a democracy. In order to ensure the relevance and coherence of the policies developed and to target resources more effectively, we must provide politicians with information on literacy and exemplary results, whenever possible, particularly if we wish to introduce and encourage new practices, such as the use of information and communications technologies.

Need and opportunity to come together to act more effectively

We must bring together decision-makers, intervention environments, researchers, businesses, unions, etc. We must act cooperatively as a network rather than in isolation, participate in the mobilization of resources and assume our share of the responsibility in carrying out initiatives that have been chosen and planned together. We must prevent “co-errance,” promote cohesion among specialists and resource persons, and ensure coherent interventions. It can be done, as certain organizations such as the Agence nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme (ANLCI) in France, Lire et écrire in Belgium and the Commission des partenaires du marché du travail in Québec have shown.

Conditions for functional partnerships

As the experiences of France and Belgium have shown, certain conditions are necessary to build effective partnerships, especially when several ministries, levels of government and sectors of civil society are asked to help raise the level of literacy competencies, particularly among populations most affected by poverty. These conditions include:

- working together to develop projects and their supporting structure: adopting guiding principles, clear language and shared orientations; planning and sharing initiatives that respect the mission and competencies of everyone; planning ongoing research and evaluation, continuously striving to improve quality, etc.
- listening to all partners and making their voices heard, starting with those of adults
- sharing information and knowledge
- adopting a transparent approach
- acknowledging diversity and accepting it
- accepting dissent and dealing with it

Recognition of local initiatives in all government policies

We must ensure that local initiatives are recognized in all government policies and that people working in the field receive the support they need, by giving them time and means for reflection as part of an ongoing action research or development research process. The six pedagogical days allotted to educators in Québec adult education centres are clearly not enough. What is needed is to support the dynamic and dialectic relationship of action/reflection, which is experienced first and foremost in each centre. One solution would be to bring policy makers and policy implementers closer together.

Allocation of means needed to implement policies

At the local level, we must address the personal plans of individuals and populations before proposing a training plan. We must build bridges between training centres or organizations and the sectors of society that are called upon to support continuing education and training and lifelong education plans. This will allow us to create and use “detours,” a term that was used repeatedly during the plenary sessions to describe how training can be incorporated into an individual's or a community's personal plan, as may be the case with libraries, health centres, businesses or economic organizations. We must also focus more on reception and follow-up services, set up orientation services, coordinate support activities for adults throughout their process, and establish networks with community organizations. Not only must we recognize diverse locations and partners, but we must also organize and support partnerships. All of these aspects of local action may be included in a literacy policy or a broader policy on adult education and training. Moreover, the means used to attain these goals should be chosen and allocated accordingly and adequately.

Professional development of educators and other staff

We must not forget to provide professional development to educators and other staff working with low-literacy populations and individuals, as this is crucial to the implementation of any policy.

Importance of structured forums for discussion, consensus and coordination

The mobilization that literacy requires will never occur spontaneously. Rather, it comes about through structured forums for discussion, consensus and coordination in which visions of the situation can be shared and jointly-decided intervention programs can be implemented. These forums must be recognized and supported.

Use of international organizations as think tanks

International organizations are also structured forums for discussion, consensus and coordination. We must use them optimally and, on occasion, defend their presence and support their initiatives.



Chapter 7



Plenary Session 7

7. SUMMARY AND PROPOSALS

This summary of the work accomplished at the Seminar is broken down into two parts: the major statements formulated during discussions and debate at the first six plenary sessions; and the aspirations and proposals expressed during the seventh and final plenary session.

7.1. SUMMARY OF THE PLENARY SESSIONS

The statements formulated at the end of each plenary session are grouped under the three components of the Seminar: *Vision, Innovation and Participation*.

7.1.1. VISION

The statements pertaining to *Vision* deal with concepts, definitions and the ideas that they evoke.

Clearly, consensus-seeking was not on the agenda; rather, there seemed to be some hesitation regarding the relevance or necessity of defining literacy using one of several available terms. Some participants distinguished between functional illiteracy, illiteracy, second-language learning or learning in a context of francization, with all these concepts implying varying literacy skill levels. These participants felt that it is important to label a problem before finding a solution, especially since, in a context of limited resources, political and economic decision-makers tend to ignore the individuals concerned who are not in the habit of speaking out or organizing collective action.

Other participants, more concerned about the target population, were wary of the negative connotation of some of the concepts used. Referring to literacy skill levels avoids the usual concepts, but does not resolve the issue because it alludes to low literacy skills and the minimum performance (Level 3) required for coping with the demands of everyday life in today's society; this creates a distinction between those who have these skills and those who do not.

During the seventh plenary session, one participant identified this wariness by pointing out that two types of discourse are used, depending on whether decision-makers or the individuals and populations concerned are being addressed. In the first case, in order to better sensitize and persuade, the focus is on the magnitude of problems of functional illiteracy and illiteracy. In the other case, these individuals are valued by emphasizing their various skills (not just in relation to writing), to promote and support any learning process that could contribute to improving their situations.

In this regard, and in accordance with the objectives of United Nations Literacy Decade, it could prove useful to review UNESCO's definition of literacy as referred to in the first plenary session:

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group or society.

Such is the background behind the 12 statements that were retained during the final plenary session.

Establish, with and for the various stakeholders, a clear definition of literacy

Arriving at a clear definition of literacy, with and for the various stakeholders, will help to:

- convince the population of the importance of education and training and politicians of the need to invest in this training
- instill a desire and develop opportunities for learning

It may not be possible to reach a consensus, but it is essential, if we are to work together in our literacy efforts, that we at least express a vision to guide our actions.

This vision must be positive, based on all the target populations' competencies—not just those related to reading and writing—and fall within a perspective of lifelong learning.

Politicians must be convinced to invest in and commit themselves to literacy. Perhaps in this way, current levels of funding can be maintained and even increased.

Recognize that the definition of concepts is influenced by external factors

It must be recognized that the definition of concepts is influenced by society's expectations, including economic ones, by adults' needs and by the various stakeholders (e.g. researchers, practitioners, administrators).

The concerns of each group influence its viewpoint and focus of what is commonly referred to as "literacy."

Position literacy within a continuum of competency acquisition

Ideally, literacy should be positioned within a continuum of competency acquisition, without neglecting those with the lowest literacy skills who may not fully commit to this process.

In other words, acquiring competencies throughout one's life should not be overdetermined by reading and writing skills and by the linear course of regular education. While a majority of individuals and groups can commit to lifelong learning, progressing from elementary school to university or from Level 1 to subsequent literacy skill levels, others develop skills orally and horizontally through "life-wide learning."

Transition from a culture of poverty to one of continuing education and training

Although concise, this statement may lead to confusion. It was often mentioned during the Seminar that the fight against illiteracy is tied to the fight against poverty, which is a factor of exclusion. However, this is not automatic, and certain attempts at literacy and continuing education and training may serve to increase exclusion. Thus, numerous participants emphasized the need to focus on the culture and experience of the most weakened populations, on the recognition of their practices and skills, whatever they may be, on real and expressed needs, and on the activities that are important to them.

Support the transition from oral to written cultures by facilitating access to written cultures

Once again, concision may lead to confusion. Although the transition from oral to written culture may be necessary for a number of reasons (e.g. work, migration, participation in universal culture), it must not lead to a devaluation of oral culture. Oral cultures, such as Gypsy culture in the southern Mediterranean, Creole culture in Haiti, and Aboriginal culture in the Northwest Territories, constitute the core of an identity and a sense of belonging that no exogenous promise of progress can replace. However, recognizing and valuing these cultures must not result in the creation of ghettos.

The challenge therefore seems to lie between fully recognizing oral cultures and the competencies they promote (e.g. the ability to see, listen, use what one sees) and using these competencies to access written culture, without causing a rift or losing pride in sharing one's knowledge.

Give meaning to training by recognizing individuals' competencies and focusing on their interests, challenges and needs

This statement is a confirmation of the two preceding statements; however, it addresses all the populations targeted by literacy, who often do not feel concerned by calls to acquire training or by the type of training on offer.

Make the prevention of illiteracy a development project based on existing competencies

This statement encompasses the desire expressed by participants throughout the Seminar to adopt and transmit a positive vision of literacy and illiteracy prevention. Thus, it was reiterated that we must build on existing competencies, especially those of parents and various community players, who are capable of encouraging and supporting young people in a variety of projects that, among other things, promote lifelong learning.

Establish a connection between literacy and health in literacy policies and programs

Low literacy is closely related not only to poverty and social exclusion, but also to health. If we believe that individuals must take charge of their health, then in a context of an aging population, it is essential that literacy initiatives pay specific and sustained attention to health matters, which predominate this population's concerns.

As part of an over-arching approach, health policies, programs and practices should also include a literacy component to maximize their effect.

Recognize the importance of structured forums for discussion, consensus and coordination

It is recognized that the fight against illiteracy or, in a more positive light, the widespread adoption of habits and practices related to lifelong learning, requires the mobilization of all sectors and players in

society. This mobilization never occurs spontaneously, but rather, it comes about through structured forums for discussion, consensus and coordination, through which visions can be shared and jointly-decided intervention programs can be implemented.

These forums must be recognized and supported.

Use the think tanks of international organizations

International organizations are also forums for discussion, consensus and coordination. We must use them to their full potential and on occasion, defend their presence and support their initiatives.

Ensure consistent funding in a context of limited resources

From the start, participants emphasized that it is not enough to simply ask that current levels of funding be maintained; more funding must be obtained, given the need and the strategic importance of continuing education and training, including literacy, in the development of individuals and societies.

However, choices must be made. For these choices to be as effective as possible, they must be coherent, and coherence begins with a clear vision of the reality, problems, challenges and issues at hand.

Ensure coherence and continuity in policies

The vision or visions that normally form the basis for coherent policies should also guide how such policies are implemented over time. Thus, by ensuring the sustainability and continuity of policies, we may be able to increase funding.

7.1.2. INNOVATION

The statements pertaining to *Innovation* concern literacy intervention strategies and practices. These statements do not cover all the proposals for innovation raised during the Seminar, as we could have also included statements from the following chapter that deal with promoting and increasing participation.

Put in place the means to elicit, promote and support the expression of educational demand

As mentioned previously, given that the target population does not generally feel concerned by the training offered, methods must be put in place to elicit, promote and support the expression of educational demand.

Participants specifically emphasized the need to take steps, before offering the usual training services, to target the living environments, situations and concerns of the populations concerned. It was also noted that this type of operation is rarely funded because, among other reasons, it falls into a kind of “grey area” of intervention.

Participants also highlighted the importance of “dispositional” barriers to participation, which are essentially related to the learner's basic attitudes towards training. These attitudes are important because they consolidate the motivation that drives an individual to seek training and overcome the material and organizational obstacles that in some cases are a determining factor.

Contextualize initiatives within target populations and their environments

Since literacy initiatives should be based on individuals and their environments (e.g. family, work, community), situations, concerns, interests, experience and prior learning, then literacy services and activities should target specific populations (e.g. the elderly, young adults, immigrants).

Integrate and support a range of intervention approaches and settings

Because the target populations and their relationships to literacy and training are so varied, a range of intervention approaches and settings should be adopted.

Make health care personnel aware of the challenge of low literacy

As mentioned earlier, it is not enough to introduce health as a specific theme in literacy programs. To mobilize all the players in the health field, we must sensitize and train all health personnel who regularly deal with adults whose low literacy skills may cause them significant difficulties in managing their health.

Make information accessible

To make information accessible means to identify target populations, work continuously with service recipients, adjust the language level, make the messages positive, experiment with tools and evaluate them before making them available, and diversify the methods of communication.

This statement was formulated during the session on the mobilization of reading and writing competencies. Some participants pointed out that a large amount of written information, especially on public services, could provide educational settings and situations that encourage the participation of persons with low literacy skills.

Promote mediation of written information

Many mediators or resource persons can relay information to adults and help them understand written messages. Through awareness raising and support, these “informal caregivers” can become invaluable assets in developing literacy.

Increase and improve the professional development of educators with respect to the mobilization of competencies

Like mediators, educators should be sensitized and equipped to use and create environments and situations suitable for carrying out everyday practices related to writing and reading.

7.1.3. PARTICIPATION

The statements under *Participation* concern the organization of literacy, especially in terms of partnerships.

Come together to act more effectively

We must bring together decision-makers, intervention environments, researchers, businesses, unions, etc. Acting as a network rather than in isolation will provide savings in resources and greater effectiveness.

It was repeated on numerous occasions during the Seminar that literacy in all its forms cannot be achieved without help from all the agents for change in various sectors of society, who must not only support initiatives, but also take an active part in providing services.

Coordinate the available resources and increase accessibility

Before contemplating and organizing partnerships, all stakeholders must recognize the need to coordinate available resources, and all means must be taken to make them fully accessible to the target populations.

Bring together the conditions for partnership

To be effective in designing and implementing literacy services and activities, an association of partners must, as a minimum:

- develop a project and its supporting structure
- share information
- adopt a transparent approach
- listen to needs
- acknowledge diversity
- accept dissent
- recognize and respect the mission of others
- share resources

Take into account the realities expressed by learners when designing policies, programs and practices

This statement relates directly to how the expression of educational demand impacts the orientation of policies. It is no longer enough to simply assess demand when adjusting an offer of service. Those expressing the demand must be approached to ascertain their point of view, help them formulate their demand and, where applicable, support their decision to receive training. The creation or adjustment of an adequate response will follow as part of a process that was educational at the outset.

Promote a local approach that respects the specific characteristics and dynamics of each environment by relying on political leadership

Initiatives targeted at specific populations and based on their respective situations and contexts have a greater chance of success. Once again, these initiatives must stem from a determined political will that is able to recognize their relevance and support their implementation.

Support, especially through professional development, the role of educators in relation to local reflection and action

Not only must professional development be promoted in terms of the local expertise that is developed through action/reflection, but the conditions required to put in place a partnership of practice, including time for discussion, must also be created.

Bring together health care personnel as well as personnel from all partner sectors in literacy to work on researching and implementing local solutions

The professional development referred to in the preceding statement could be part of a shared and ongoing research-action process focusing on the most effective means of promoting and supporting the most vulnerable individuals and populations in their own development.

Pursue and intensify research on the costs of illiteracy and on the benefits of literacy

This statement pertains especially to the health sector, to guide and support the decisions made by the relevant authorities.



7.2. ASPIRATIONS AND PROPOSALS

When participants were asked to suggest follow-ups to the Seminar, they formulated these aspirations and proposals:

- It is hoped that the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) will encourage universities to offer training and research programs in adult education. There were once a number of adult education departments in Québec, but they have all disappeared, and with them, the expertise that will take time to rebuild again.
- It is requested that a meeting soon be held in Québec as a follow-up to the Seminar and in order to update the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* and its action plan. In particular, we need to examine the possibility of developing a more extensive, promising partnership that is characterized by a culture of lifelong learning at all levels of society. We must build networks, by establishing regional associations in addition to provincial associations.
- It is requested that the MELS take the lead in bringing together other ministries and various stakeholders in education and adult education in Québec. A detailed organizational chart should be established of "who does what" in the field so that a structured, functional partnership may be set up. We could use France's experience as inspiration. The federal government should be invited to communicate its position on matters related to continuing education and training.
- It is strongly suggested that, from now on, adult learners be invited to participate in this type of meeting in order to better understand the issues at hand. They should be considered the first experts to be consulted.
- It is requested that Québec participants and the rest of Canada take part in protest activities against the federal government cuts that directly impact the populations most in need of support and the organizations working with these populations locally.¹⁴ Members of Parliament and senators must be made aware of and equipped to defend the cause of literacy and the fight against poverty and its many repercussions. The media and journalists should also be contacted and engaged in the cause.
- It is suggested that such discussions be pursued in Canada and that they be positioned within an international perspective.
- It is proposed that an international work group be created on the prevention of family illiteracy, in order to share and further explore initiatives and experiences in this area.

14. For more information, please see Appendix 24.

- It is proposed that a work group also be created to focus on the follow-ups required in terms of the Seminar's themes and lifelong learning. This work group could also involve other countries, and could be part of the preparatory work for CONFINTEA VI, to be held in 2009.





Closing Remarks

Closing Remarks

Lili Paillé, Director, Formation générale des adultes at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport in Québec

Ladies and gentlemen,

The work we have accomplished here since Saturday speaks volumes. I would like to thank you all for your vigorous participation in the discussions.

From what I gather by what my team members have been reporting to me with such enthusiasm, your rich discussions have yielded many insights into the problem we have addressed at this Seminar.

As we have seen these past three days, the fight against illiteracy and, consequently, against poverty and social exclusion, is one of the main strategies that industrialized nations employ to meet the highly complex challenges affecting the labour market and social cohesion that stem from economic, demographic and social changes. Only through innovation, research and partnership can we meet this challenge, and that is why the theme *Vision, Innovation, Participation* was chosen for this Seminar.

I would like to broach three subjects with you:

1. The first one concerns Québec. In 2002, we developed a *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (as representatives from Québec mentioned in their speeches), which contained several measures proposed in response to the issues raised during the discussions.

Allow me to go over some of the results we have achieved regarding these measures.

- **Regarding the expression of educational demand**, which is at the centre of the government policy and action plan of the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, we have taken action, quite successfully I believe, on the following:
 - A national campaign promoting the hotline *Info-Alpha* on the theme that you see behind me, *Savoir lire, écrire et compter, c'est profiter de la vie!* (Reading, writing and counting: that's part of life!). The results of this campaign are clear, and reveal, among other things, an increase in the number of calls received and in enrollments in literacy services.
 - The implementation of a new structure for reception, referral, guidance and support services in all school boards across Québec, in order to provide appropriate support for the personal plans of adult learners.

- The development of tools, particularly for adults with little education who have acquired experience in many areas, to help these adults establish a record of learning and competencies and bolster academic and career counselling.
 - The implementation of prior learning recognition services that allow both formal and informal learning to be recognized so that adults may pursue their studies.
- **Regarding prevention,** I have been told that, during the past couple of days, you have often debated the meaning of certain terms. It may perhaps be appropriate to question what we mean by prevention and to specify who is concerned or what we can contribute to the issue.

But beyond words and meanings, we note that certain programs, such as the emergent literacy program and the program on families, schools and communities succeeding together, have brought about a change in mentality, and, as a result, the importance of early family intervention is taking root in the community.

- **Regarding competencies,** the literacy programs have been revised to take into account all of the social roles that adults assume and enable them to take part fully in civic life.

As you heard on Monday morning, we have also conducted a study on the mobilization of competencies jointly with the Université de Sherbrooke, an initiative that should help broaden our model of partnership in this area.

Of course, Québec's *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* includes other measures associated with lifelong learning, such as the renewal of general education programs, workplace training, vocational training, programs for 16- to 24-year olds. But as I said earlier, I will limit myself to the field of literacy.

2. The second subject I would like to talk about is how to follow up on the government's policy in light of what we have heard at this seminar. We will soon be reaching the government's policy implementation deadline and will be taking stock of what has been done.

The discussions conducted during this Seminar will no doubt give us food for thought and inspire our respective work in the future, but there are a few avenues we can already share and begin to incorporate into our efforts.

- Review concepts in light of our observations to better stimulate the expression of educational demand and above all to reach out to populations that show very little or no interest in education and training.
- Make our messages to the public more positive and raise awareness about the difficulties that certain populations face in everyday life.

- Take into account social characteristics (e.g. demographics, health, aging, immigration) when establishing priorities in literacy.
- Increase the range and variety of training methods and settings, but also review learning content in order to be as near to the populations as possible, be it in geographic terms or in terms of their interests and reality.
- Review, broaden and, if necessary, consolidate, our partnership structures.

Several other initiatives have been identified as successful or desirable, and the Seminar's proceedings will allow us to consider them all.

3. **Lastly, this morning I heard a proposal concerning the creation of an international work group** that would initially bring together the countries in attendance at the Seminar, with a view to enriching the culture of lifelong learning and achieving the expected outcomes of the United Nations Literacy Decade. I am making a note of the interest shown, as I believe it is indeed a concrete way of meeting the objectives that were set out at the beginning of the Seminar and of adapting to new trends that have emerged from joint research projects, action research and the dissemination of information.

I also think it is an excellent idea to table the Seminar proceedings at UNESCO, in order to strengthen our collaborative efforts.

As you know, in meetings such as this, there are always certain expressions that stay with you. In my case, it is the following:

- Taking action for – taking action together– rather than taking action on
- We must act on all fronts at the same time

But there is something else that has struck me and excites my imagination by its originality and potential, and that is “life-wide learning.”

I will leave you with that, and thank you very much for your active participation.

I wish you a safe trip home and look forward to seeing you again soon.





Éducation,
Loisir et Sport

Québec

