

# excerpt from The history of Manitoba's adult literacy programs

by Marion Terry

■ In its Second World Conference on Adult Education in 1960, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) confirmed the role of adult education as "part of the normal pattern of adult life," instead of just "a remedial activity" (Selman, Selman, Cooke, & Dampier, 1998, p. 67). By the time the federal government passed the Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act in 1960, Manitoba had established its own community college system. It was soon obvious, however, that many of the adults who sought vocational training lacked prerequisite academic skills (Thomas, 1983). Therefore, the federal Adult Occupational Training Act of 1967, which created the Department of Manpower and Immigration, established the BLADE (Basic Literacy for Adult Development) NewStart program as well as ABE (Adult Basic Education) and BTSD (Basic Training for Skill Development) programs for 0-12 upgrading. Provincial community colleges delivered these programs, but Canada Manpower paid for them by purchasing seats and providing allowances to cover sponsored students' personal expenses. In the eyes of both levels of government and the students, these programs changed the status of program participants from "unemployed" to "trainees" preparing for further post-secondary or trades courses (Darville, 1992, p. 13).

During the 1960s and early 1970s, two distinct groups of adult literacy advocates arose: those who saw literacy in terms of empowering adults to combat poverty and social oppression, and those who saw it in terms of acquiring technical skills (Darville, 1992). UNESCO's replacement of the previous "grade nine education" literacy definition with an all-encompassing definition of the functionally literate adult as someone who "can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his groups and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development" (UNESCO, 1962, as cited in Cairns, 1988, p. 4) appealed to both advocacy groups. ...

By the mid-1970s, terms such as "lifelong learning" and "continuing education" (Thomas, 1983, p. 63), which had become entrenched in the educational vernacular during the late 1960s and early 1970s, lost their lustre. In 1973, the federal government introduced what were intended to be shorter-term BJRT (Basic Job Readiness Training) courses, because the longer-term BTSD courses were not serving as an expressway to direct employment or trades training (Darville, 1992), despite consuming about a third of the federal government's \$100,000,000 Canada Manpower Training Program budget (Thomas). Then, when a 1976 Canada Employment and Immigration (CEIC) review revealed that over a third of BTSD students were grade eleven high school dropouts below the age of twenty who were preparing for post-secondary university education (Selman et al., 1998), the federal government put even more emphasis on BJRT courses, restricted BTSD seat purchases to clients over the age of twenty-one, reduced the number of ABE 11-12 courses to more closely match the number of openings in trades training programs with grade eleven or twelve prerequisites, and began to phase out BTSD 0-8 altogether (Darville, 1992). Thus, by the end of the 1970s, federally funded education for undereducated adults "almost ceased to exist" (Thomas, p. 65). ■

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**MARION TERRY** is Learning Skills Specialist in the Academic Skills Centre at Brandon University. Her 2007 article, "The History of Manitoba's adult literacy programs" is from *JALM: Journal of Adult Learning in Manitoba*, Vol. 1, 27-40. It is available online at: [www.mb.literacy.ca/JALM1.pdf](http://www.mb.literacy.ca/JALM1.pdf).

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