

Childcare and Literacy

Can we learn from each other?

The 2005 federal budget included Canada's first national childcare program and \$30 million for adult literacy. These funding announcements raised similar questions for both fields: What does funding for national initiatives mean when the actual programs are administered by each province and territory? Do increases in federal funding translate to changes within programs? How does federal funding affect the working conditions of front-line staff? In June 2005, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) brought together childcare activists and literacy advocates to consider what the two sectors might have in common. In this excerpt, these women discuss links between policy and research. To read the full transcript, go to www.literacyjournal.ca.

Kerry McCuaig: In our early days childcare was a feminist issue. Childcare was about supporting women to take part in society in a full way by allowing them to enjoy the right to be parents and workers in the same way that men are. It's since been taken up by the scientists who are almost overwhelmingly guys and the focus is the early years, early brain development. Although that can take the discussion down routes that you don't like, on the other hand, it's moved the issue from the women's pages into the mainstream. I think it's been critical for catapulting it into public policy. But unfortunately the professionals, the early childhood educators who work in this field, are not seen as child development experts, but the child development experts are anyone but [childcare workers].

Trudy Lothian: There is not a wealth of research in adult literacy acquisition in the way that there is with early childhood development. And what research there is...much of it is qualitative and much of it is ethnographic...it's really hard to use qualitative data with the government. And, so what ultimately ends up happening is that we use the Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey as our advocacy tool because it's alarmist...It has helped us to get

literacy on the national agenda, but in the last ten years there hasn't been a major shift in those stats. And there are tremendous problems and issues with the way it measures literacy because the reality of literacy is different from the generalizable underlying skill in order to do a particular task on the survey. What we need are studies that the field buys into, that the field accepts as realistic and with that you would have the heart to advocate.

Jamie Kass: That's interesting. Because our research sector has been I think by and large tied to the advocacy sector. So there's been an incredibly positive relationship between those that see themselves primarily as researchers and those that see themselves as activists. The research that we've done has tended to take the field forward.

...how (do) we move...into creating a system that's really going to promote access, inclusion and citizenship

Kerry McCuaig: The childcare movement since 1982 has had a platform demanding universal access to good quality, affordable, developmental childcare. The research...came to support those principles. It indicates that if you want a good program it shouldn't be targeted. It should have trained staff, it should be in a good environment, the staff should be supported and the early learning environment should be responsive to the needs of the child, etcetera. We've seen this expressed in statements by the feds and provinces and it's showing up in their federal-provincial agreements. Now, the next stage is for the community to work with the provinces as they develop their childcare plans. We have developed this checklist to indicate whether the childcare plan supports the principles or not. So research has not only been useful but essential to shaping the policy context for the field.

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Tamara Levine: ...I think what we [in literacy] don't have is that qualitative research that looks at, for example, the learning conditions and what

difference does that make to adult learners and their learning processes and whether they are able to achieve their goals and reach their potential. But I think that's partly because of how literacy learners are seen. They are seen as not particularly important in terms of the population, they're often second chance learners who didn't have a chance to finish school or for whom the school system was an abysmal failure. Or they're immigrants.

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Trudy Lothian: ...one of the things that I've heard myself advocating for recently is the idea of normalizing literacy. Right now it's a stigma. And [with] the IALS...they're saying that you have to at least have a grade 12 education in order to be productive and trainable. There are people in the world that are perfectly literate and at a level 3 or at a level 4 if you use that language in this context, but in another context they aren't. And they aren't illiterate-right, the horrible word. They are perfectly able people but this is the way society conceptualizes literacy and forces them on the fringe instead of as workers or as people who are doing things.

Tamara Levine: ...Within labour we were also focused on the workplace, but in fact we have much more in common with the community-based programs because of the citizenship scene and the whole person theme and that literacy is for all parts of our life, not just for the workplace. So I think we have common cause within labour to work with the literacy community and to learn from the childcare advocacy around how we move away from this individualization, privatization of the issue into creating a system that's really going to promote access, inclusion, and citizenship.

Kerry McCuaig: But part of that jump [for childcare] was being able to move the debate from the private into the public sphere. We argued that childcare isn't just about whether or not a parent makes it or breaks it for their kid. We raised the social benefit and the huge social cost if children in their early years do not get off to a good start. So the question is, are you able to quantify some of the literacy research, some of the information that's

already there in order to argue, "This isn't just to be nice to people who didn't make it through high school. This is about if you don't do it, we all pay."

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Isobel Bisby: In our program what we're talking about-I'm sure this is the case in most programs-we're talking about self-confidence. It isn't really literacy half the time. The people have the skills, they just don't believe they have the skills...And if you're working with adults with all their prior learning, everybody has skills.

Trudy Lothian: ...But I think one of the successes of the program that you work in is this community building...the literacy component is integrated into other things that people want to do. And so the stigma dissolves.

It's just one of many things and if you have to be able to do this in order to do that, well then let's do that, you know, so we can get there.

Jamie Kass: Interesting. In childcare we want that same integration of services. Maybe not for the stigma piece per se, but just that that's the best way to deliver the services: Integrated...rather than having the childcare program out there all by themselves.

Tamara Levine: It makes so much sense and literacy could be a huge part of that. ■

Participants: **Isobel Bisby** is coordinator at Alternative Learning Styles and Outlooks (also), a literacy program in Ottawa. **Jamie Kass** is a child care worker who now coordinates the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' child care program. **Tamara Levine** coordinates the Workplace Literacy Project at the Canadian Labour Congress. **Trudy Lothian** coordinates a school board adult literacy program in Ottawa. **Kerry McCuaig** is a long-time advocate, consultant, strategist and communications expert on childcare.

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