



Literacy and Disabilities*

Despite rapid advances in technology and learning tools, people with disabilities are still being left behind on their journey towards literacy.ⁱ

Literacy rates among people with disabilities in Canada

Statistics on the literacy rates among people with disabilities is limited. While there are some statistics on disabilities and some on adult literacy, there is a need for further research on literacy rates among people with disabilities.

- One in seven (3.4 million) Canadians aged 15 years and over has a disability.ⁱⁱ The rate is even higher among Aboriginal peoples. One in five (20%) Aboriginal peoples aged 15 years and older have a disability.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Approximately 50% of Canadian adults with disabilities experience literacy barriers.ⁱⁱⁱ Literacy barriers can include print or verbal: unnecessary words, small or congested fonts, complicated or professional jargon, acronyms, and access to information or services only through websites.
- 20% of adults with disabilities have less than a grade 9 education, as compared to 8.1% of adults without a disability who have less than a grade 9 education.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 50% of adults with disabilities have an annual income of less than \$15,000.ⁱⁱⁱ Nearly 50% of adults with limited literacy live in low-income households.^{iv} Only 56% of people with disabilities are employed, and most are working in low paying jobs.^v
- People with disabilities make up a disproportionate amount of the 48% of Canadian adults who function at the two lowest literacy levels.^{vi}

Literacy needs among people with disabilities

The best way to understand the literacy needs of people with disabilities is to listen. Listening to individuals with disabilities, as well as organizations that represent them can help everyone to understand the relationship between literacy and disabilities. Here is what we currently know:

- All national surveys on either literacy or disabilities have identified that people with disabilities are disadvantaged when accessing education, employment, housing, and other community services.ⁱⁱⁱ
- There is a wide range of disabilities (physical, intellectual, visual, hearing, psychiatric, and learning). The severity and type of disability has different degrees of impact on an individual's literacy.^v

** Note: In this fact sheet, we refer to disabilities that are physical, intellectual, visual, psychiatric and/or hearing-related. Information on learning disabilities is contained in another MCL fact sheet.*

Literacy needs among people with disabilities (*continued*)

- There is a serious lack of public awareness about adult literacy and disabilities.^{vi} Stereotyping and assumptions about the capacity of people with disabilities to learn and to work are harsh social barriers.
- Many mainstream literacy programs do not have the skills or resources to accommodate people with disabilities^{vii}
- Aboriginal people with disabilities are more likely to have low literacy and experience systemic racism, which impedes accessibility to community services including literacy programs.^{iii viii}

What can be done?

To build a society that values inclusion it is important to challenge the assumption that literacy is only reading and writing on paper. There are multiple literacies and multiple ways of communicating including American Sign Language, Braille, technologies, gestures and sounds. Here are some ways to help make Canada a society that truly includes everyone:

- Support people with disabilities to voice their ideas and needs about literacy and life long learning. Individuals involved in disabilities organizations can initiate conversations with each other about local literacy or continuing education programs, and find out what courses or programs accommodate people with disabilities.
- Build and strengthen relationships and partnerships between literacy programs and community disabilities programs. Develop training for staff and volunteers to learn about current issues in literacy and disabilities and to develop strategies to reduce barriers.
- Community disabilities programs can increase their awareness of literacy and incorporate plain language strategies and literacy related activities into their programs and services. Some organizations have written their by-laws and policies in plain language.
- Adult literacy programs can increase their accommodations for people with disabilities that will improve accessibility and participation. This includes staff and tutor training about disabilities, physical setting, assistive technologies, inclusion of support person(s), flexible learning timelines, and appropriate assessment tools.
- Family literacy programs can provide accommodations for families with children and/or parents with disabilities that will improve accessibility and participation. Examples of programs that have an inclusive approach are Rhymes that Bind and Books for Babies.
- Challenge current practices and policies that perpetuate the myth of “train the best and leave the rest”^v way of thinking. While literacy is important for employment, improving one’s reading and writing skills is also important for family and community participation in an inclusive, cohesive society. Literacy programs that accommodate students with developmental disabilities found that most students experienced increased self-confidence, willingness to take risks, and greater awareness of their own learning.^{ix}
- Develop knowledge to better understand the complex relationship between literacy and disabilities.
- Create funding and policies that include literacy and numeracy provision for people with disabilities as per recommendations 14, 15 and 16 in the 2003 *Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities*.

Suggested *Literacy and Disabilities* Resources

- **Literacy for Independent Living.** On-line resource for the literacy and disabilities communities, by the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC). <http://www.nald.ca/ava/english/textonly/aboutTO.htm>
- **National Adult Literacy Database.** The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) has a growing collection of online resources and links for literacy and disabilities information at www.nald.ca.
- **Neil Squire Foundation** provides education, technology and career development for people with physical disabilities, including programs such as Speech Assisted Reading and Writing, Access to Literacy, Computer Comfort and Educational Options. <http://www.neilsquire.ca>.
- **Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response.** Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, 2003. www.parl.gc.ca/InfoComDoc/37/2/HUMA/Studies/Reports/humarp03-e.htm.
- **Roehrer Institute** has resources and research on literacy and intellectual disabilities. www.roehrer.ca.
- **Visunet** is the CNIB (Canadian National Institute for the Blind) networked library service for Canadians unable to read print. This includes an on-line library catalogue, internet and telephone access to daily newspapers in French and English, help centre for online resources, and a full text access to electronic and digital media materials. www.cnib.ca/eng/index.htm.
- **Working in Literacy with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Adults.** A report on the importance of making adult literacy programs accessible to deaf, deaf-blind and hearing-impaired people. Louise Ford and Cheryl Wilson-Lum, Literacy Programme, Capital Region Centre for the Hearing Impaired, 1993. www.ottawadeafcentre.org

ⁱ Literacy for Independent Living-Canadian Association for Independent Living Centres, 2003. www.nald.ca/lil/english/litinfo.htm

ⁱⁱ Statistics Canada (2003). *Participant and Activity Limitation Survey: A profile of disability in Canada*, 2001. The Daily. December 3, 2003. Ottawa. www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/021203/d021203a.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Rioux, M., Zubrow, E., Stutt Bunch, M., Miller, W. (2003). *Atlas of Literacy and Disability*. Canadian Abilities Foundation. Toronto. www.abilities.ca

^{iv} Shalla, V. & Schellenberg, G. (1998). *The Value of Words: Literacy and Economic Security in Canada*. Ottawa, Ontario: Ministry of Industry. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-552-MIE/89-552-MIE3.pdf>

^v Macht, J. (2000). *Literacy and Disability*. Persons with Disabilities Advisory Committee, BC. www.nald.ca/fulltext/litdis/cover.htm

^{vi} Kapsalis, C. (1999). *The Effect of Disability on Literacy Skills*. (Data Probe Economic Consulting Inc.) Nepean.

^{vii} Sussman, S. (2003) *Moving the Markers*. New Perspectives on Adult Literacy Rates in Canada. Movement for Canadian Literacy. Ottawa. <http://www.literacy.ca/public/moving/moving.pdf>

^{viii} St. Denis, V. and Hampton, E. (2002). *Literature Review on Racism and the Effects on Aboriginal Education*. Indian and Northern Affairs. Ottawa. http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/pub/krw/rac_e.pdf

^{ix} Sanders, M. (1991) *Meeting Challenges: A literacy project for adults with developmental disabilities*. Prospects Adult Literacy Association. Edmonton.