

SECTION 1

Executive Summary

Introduction

Partnership is becoming an ever more present idea as the best way to go about solving social, cultural and economic issues of the day. This partnership dialogue now encompasses adult literacy. However, there is a tendency to use the term loosely or to define it to whatever suits our needs at the moment.

“Canada was the envy of the industrialized world for its creation and innovation around workplace literacy in the 1990s.”

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The purpose of this interpretative case study was to document a government initiative through the Human Resources and Social Development Canada’s (HRSDC) National Literacy Secretariat called the Business and Labour Partnership program that has been in existence since 1988. The overall intention was to understand the process of partnership development and the strategies that were used to engage business, labour, literacy practitioners, and provincial and territorial governments in adult work-related literacy at a time when no such program model existed.

The case study focused on a particular program that had a longevity that allowed for important representations of the partnership phenomenon. The primary method for collecting data was through semi-structured interview schedules. Questions were drawn from a literature review that focused on partnership development and program planning. Considerable attention was given to the selection of interviewees from stakeholder groups of business, labour, and government from different regions across Canada. Along with interviewees, other sources of information were used such as archival records, documents that were both print and electronic, and field notes.

Twenty-six, face-to-face interviews were conducted between May and July 2006 and 60 documents were collected. Several techniques

were used in the data analysis path. One of these techniques, categorical aggregation, produced a collection of instances and relevant meanings based on a coding scheme designed from the interview schedules. Eight major themes emerged from the various data sources.

Three periods of time that covered the current life span of the program were used as units of analysis. The first period is referred to as the *foundation building* of the program and included the years 1988 to 1995. The second period is called *development and demonstration* and covers the years from 1996 to 2000. The third time frame is called the period of *program change* and spans the years from 2001 to 2006. In the spring of 2006, the National Literacy Secretariat became the National Office of Literacy and Learning, and the funding program was renamed the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program. For purpose of this project, however, the program name National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) is used throughout the document.

Key Project Findings

Theme 1: Major Accomplishments of the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program

Between 1988 and 2006, the partnership projects supported by the Program were able to develop assessment and evaluation tools, create innovative models for delivering workplace literacy, support training and consultations, and compile best practices for workplace literacy.

Many projects developed tools for workplace instructors, such as the Organizational Needs Assessment and Literacy Task Analysis. As well, a multi-year project by Bow Valley College and Skillplan developed the groundbreaking Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES).

Support for provincial initiatives laid the foundation for business, labour, and government to work together to create innovative models for delivery. One example is the Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee (WEMSC), which has changed the perception of workplace literacy in the province. The model from Manitoba has been adopted in other jurisdictions. In addition, WWestnet organized a number of conferences that became key training events for Canada. Further, a large number of projects compiled best practices for the field. These publications and reports were widely used in Research-in-Practice workshops, practitioner conferences, and clear language trainings.

“Literacy is more complex than just being able to read and write.”

Nova Scotia Federation of Labour. *Lighting the Way with Workplace Education*. Nova Scotia Federation of Labour.

At the root of the program accomplishments was a strategic position held by the NLS premised on a set of core beliefs about the need for capacity building and community development. From this position, key business and labour needs were identified first and the workplace was viewed as an innovative venue for advancing literacy. As the partnership program moved into the development and demonstration years, it enabled and supported new ideas that sprung up from the field and the stakeholders. Another core belief held by the NLS was related to the idea that new knowledge could be created from the accumulation of field practices. During the first and second periods of the program, there was also a focus on exploring new models for the delivery of workplace literacy and essential skills training.

Theme 2: Impacts on Workplace Literacy Practices

During the foundation building years (1988–1995), and the beginning of the development and demonstration period, impacts on workplace literacy were widespread. Many projects focused on customizing a curriculum for a specific worker audience or workplace setting. As well, union training events helped to open up viewpoints and increased awareness about the importance of workplace change. During the period (1996–2000), the NLS-sponsored think tanks encouraged divergent points of view and helped consolidate an emerging field of workplace practice. These think tanks were national forums for all key stakeholders in literacy. Toward the end of this phase and in the beginning of the next period,

the number of practitioner institutes increased. During the period of program change, pockets of best practices were spreading to regions where workplace literacy development was just beginning. Cutting across all three periods was the impact of the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) as a clearinghouse for current information on workplace education and the impact of both the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLSS).

Theme 3: Definitions of Partnership

There are various types and levels of partnership. There are partnerships with an upper-case “P” and partnerships with a lower-case “p”. Partnerships were found to have common qualities. Members of a successful partnership are trustworthy, persistent in obtaining goals and work in an atmosphere of openness. There is a genuine respect for each member and an acknowledgement of weaknesses. Members are all committed to making the partnership work. In the case of literacy, some type of trigger event, either positive or negative, prompted the formation of a partnership. This event acted as a catalyst for some type of action and led to the careful search for individual partners from business and labour.

Theme 4: Factors of a Successful Partnership with the NLS Business and Labour Program

The importance of visioning the full range of possibilities with the field was considered a factor in building a successful partnership. The complexities of workplace literacy were understood through a social development lens. The search for champions to carry forward this vision, which grew to include essential skills, was also a useful strategy.

Full commitment of all partners including the NLS was a second factor. Commitment of the partners was evidenced by a respect for stakeholder values, differing points of view, and open and frank discussions. At the individual project partnership level, there was also an equal sharing of the workload and a lack of hidden agendas.

Flow of information among partners was another success factor. Knowing the “big picture” which could influence proposal and project development was important. The role of NLS was that of facilitator of information and less like the administrator of regulations.

“The NLS were always looking for a way to say ‘yes’.”

EDUCATION EXPERT

The receptivity of the NLS as a funder to foster business and labour partnerships was also a success factor. This receptivity was characterized by an atmosphere of experimentation and risk taking around projects and an awareness that this was the way to move forward.

The role of the NLS personnel working with partners was another factor. They provided assistance in proposal development, acted as a resource of information, and interpreted policy guidelines for the partners.

A final success factor was the actual structure of the individual projects developed by the partners. Small projects that focused on local needs were important. Business, labour and education partners were the actual drivers of how a project was conducted.

Theme 5: Dynamics of the Business and Labour Partnership Program

At the forefront of these dynamics was the leadership taken by the NLS during the foundation building and development and demonstration periods. They advocated for business and labour projects that came from the “ground”. This leadership helped move the program from a vision to a solid starting point. Strong alliances were formed with provincial and territorial governments and connections among new partners were cemented. Partners felt comfortable in risk taking and experimenting with cutting-edge project ideas related to diverse local needs. Also during these periods, there was a complete openness and trust when negotiating among partners. During the third period, government policy changed and this influenced the dynamics in terms of leadership, risk taking and negotiation styles.

**Theme 6: Proposal and Project Support
Experiences within the Partnership Program**

“The need for essential workplace skills training is high, and such training is on the minds of government, business, labour, educators, and other workplace stakeholders” (p. i).

Ivanochko, B. (2001).
*Learning at Work
Project: Essential
Workplace Skills
Resources 1991-2001.*
Saskatchewan Labour
Force Development
Board.

During the foundation building and development and demonstration periods, there was open dialogue and a regular pattern of reconsideration for project ideas. This encouraged partnership development that was considered a cornerstone of the program. During the period of program change, support and advice for proposal ideas were slower with the one-way communication being more bureaucratic and less responsive to the project goals. Added to this, was the introduction of peer-review committees for proposals.

**Theme 7: Factors of an Unsuccessful Partnership
– Key Stakeholder Voices**

1. Conflicting objectives and hidden agendas during the initial development of a partnership can lead to a failed effort. These challenges can also surface halfway through the process. In a broader sense, when project objectives are tied to accountability rather than social development, there is more room for a disconnect between the partners’ visions and those of the funder.
2. Another factor affecting success is the working relationship among partners. Characteristics that can dampen a partnership and its work are broken trust, a lack of honesty and an unclear flow of information among partners.
3. Power struggles are another factor that can damage partnerships, especially when members do not have an understanding of each other’s organizational cultures.
4. A fourth factor that can contribute to an unsuccessful partnership is program structure barriers. When a partner organization chooses a champion from inside the organization to increase visibility of a workplace literacy issue and that individual leaves the organization, it can have a negative effect on the project work. Rigid reporting requirements and micro attention to project financial accountability can take partners

away from the “real” work and this affects project results and impacts.

Theme 8: Lessons and Program Changes

The most important lesson that can be gleaned from the data sources is that partnership development and sustainability is possible when a funding agency understands the work of the stakeholder organizations and becomes an equal partner in the process. When project work that stems from a partnership is regularly supported, a capacity for networking is established and this can spread across the country.

Over the three periods of time, changes have occurred in the program. Toward the end of the development and demonstration years (1996-2000), there was a subversion of literacy for an essential skills agenda. There was also a loss of momentum on the workplace literacy issue as provincial training agreements with HRSDC were being prepared and signed. In the period of program change (2001–2006), with its introduction of the tier system for project submissions, innovation was defined more rigidly and the concern regarding lack of information flow about policy change from the NLS heightened.

Implications for Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills

Practice

In the absence of a Pan-Canadian literacy strategy and, consequently, of anything resembling a system for adult education, the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program has been a “system enabler.” The NLS approach to partnership development has provided a framework for the development and delivery of literacy programs in the workplace. This framework is at risk as the focus of the program shifts further and further away from social development objectives.

“Poor literacy levels are a barrier to making changes and improvements needed to compete in today's world” (p. 12).

Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters. *Business Results through Literacy*. Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, Ontario Division.

Perhaps one of the lead contributions of the NLS as a system enabler has been the focus on literacy practitioner training and development. Unlike colleagues in other fields of education such as school teachers, college instructors and university professors, literacy practitioners did not generally enjoy recognition as professionals. Aside from lending credibility to workplace-based programs, practitioner training helps to position literacy learning as a legitimate education goal for adults. While there is still room for volunteers, such as peer tutors, they too take part in a training program.

In essence, the NLS approach to partnership has enabled the development of the field of workplace literacy such as we know it today. And this development is comprehensive; it involves promotion and awareness, coordination and information sharing, professional development, research, sharing of best practice models...and in turn the development of further partnerships.

Policy

This case study points to the strategic importance of multi-sector partnerships, for example with business, non-governmental organizations and labour unions in the design and implementation of government policy. Federal involvement in the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program was based on a commitment to enhancing literacy to improve economic performance and employability. Capacity building, skills development in the workplace and commitment to the creation of new knowledge from the shop floor were the tactics used by the multi-sector partnerships to achieve the federal policy objectives.

The study also reveals that to realize program objectives, the government must explain its “big picture” policy interests. Success in the foundation building and development and demonstration years of the program was due, in part, to the fact that government took time to both research the implications of literacy for the economy and to invest in the dissemination of those results to the partners in order to increase knowledge and spur developments.

A third implication is the importance of policy steadfastness in long-term and slowly evolving fields like literacy and essential skills. This means that once policies are established they must be systematically adhered to in order to succeed. The evidence suggests this objective was accomplished in the foundation building and development and demonstration years and that over time this steadfastness built a productive coalition of partners committed to working in concert to advance the clearly stated literacy policy agenda of the government. During the period of program change the policy objective of achieving literacy gains in the workplace became secondary to the preoccupation with accountability.

Research

“Lifelong learning makes opportunities accessible to all.”

British Columbia Federation of Labour and Capilano College.
Working Together: Literacy and Lifelong Learning for Union Members. British Columbia Federation of Labour.

Findings from this study have provided a rich descriptive perspective of the partnership process. It has also yielded some insights of the factors that could affect the success of partnerships in this area and also some of the potential problems that could arise and mitigate this success. For example, how important is trust and honesty in the process compared to other factors, such as balance of power, building consensus on goals and visioning of the partnership? Another important implication for research is the question of common goals and shared vision of the partnership. How significant is this to successful partnerships in general? The research questions raised by the findings of this study are important as they address the relationships among these factors identified as important in affecting the success or potential failure of such partnerships. Secondly the findings have an overlay of an unfolding process. That is, partnerships evolve over time with unique consequences and outcomes that could affect the overall success of the outcome. But how are these two research issues or questions related?

One fruitful conceptual approach to linking these factors to an unfolding process is to take a life-cycle perspective. Previous research and conceptual thinking in the organizational life-cycle management literature can be a useful way to frame the discussion on research implications from the findings of this study. The notion that organizations move through a process of growth and change

over time is useful to frame the unfolding process of the partnership process as it moves from initial funding to project goals to implementation to final outcomes as described in this study.

This life-cycle perspective also indicates that each phase has its own crisis potential and needed resolution in order for the growth or change to continue. This perspective supports the factors identified in the study as potentially contributing to the success of a partnership, or threatening its survival. The life-cycle perspective of the partnership process can therefore capture both the unfolding of the partnership in phases and also the key factors that could critically impinge on the further progress of the partnership in each phase such as trust, information sharing, goal consensus, power struggles and conflict. This life-cycle perspective can address all three phases, their salient factors, and initiates a theoretical understanding of why these factors are important in the partnership process.