

SECTION 6

Implications for Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills

In this final section of the report, the implications of the case study are highlighted. It begins with a look at how practitioners at the field level could view the findings of the study. This is followed by a discussion of implications for policy analysts, and finally a look at how researchers could build on the case study results. Three authors who reflected on the findings from their respective viewpoints have written these individual sections. This design feature is intended to provide the project with additional authenticity.

Implications for Practice

Sylvia Sioufi, Canadian Union of Public Employees

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.” This case study shows that the NLS approach to partnership development has provided a much needed framework for the development and delivery of literacy programs in the workplace. This development has been comprehensive: it involves promotion and awareness, coordination and information sharing, professional development, research, and sharing of best practice models. Essentially, the Program has helped to consolidate the emerging field of workplace literacy.

Literacy practitioners will have a keen interest in the findings of this case study as it documents what the NLS approach ‘looked like.’ At the field level this study can be used to promote literacy practice within a broad, social development framework, to strengthen the

credibility of the literacy field, and to advocate for policies and programs that build on the partnership model pioneered by the NLS.

The NLS vision of literacy practice

The NLS created a space for a dynamic approach to learning—one that recognizes that the development of literacy skills can happen in varied, and equally valuable, ways. In this context, the workplace becomes a logical venue to explore, and employer and labour groups are invited to rise to the challenge and join others in the literacy field. They are encouraged to work in partnership and to experiment to develop innovative practices to provide learning opportunities in the workplace.

“I don’t know of any other government department...that’s done so much with so little...an amazing organization.”

LABOUR EXPERT

The strength of the NLS partnership model rests not only on the recognition that many groups can contribute to the creation of learning opportunities for adults but, more importantly, that these groups must be able to contribute, and contribute equally. This is evident in the level of support—beyond simply funding—provided by the NLS in the foundation building, as well as the development and demonstration periods of the Program. A comprehensive evaluation commissioned by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) concludes that the NLS “was a significant influence on CUPE’s involvement in literacy” and that NLS staff “brought not only funding to the table but union sensitivity and a rich background with workplace literacy programs.” The evaluation also points to partnership work as the key strategy leading to the success of CUPE’s literacy program and credits the NLS with promoting and supporting this strategy. (Burke, 2006)

The NLS partnership model also recognizes that different partners have different motivations for a literacy program. Unions, employers, practitioners, and learners may all well agree that a literacy program would be beneficial, but the goals and expected outcomes may be quite different and even at odds. Rather than shy away from the politics of workplace literacy, the partnership model values the differences and creates venues to discuss them and ultimately come to the shared vision and common ground needed to build an effective partnership. The findings show that this approach

has led to successful partnerships and in turn fostered innovation in the field of workplace literacy practice.

“We did a lot of
visioning...problem
solving...risk taking.”

EDUCATION EXPERT

However, as the focus of the NLS starts to shift away from social development objectives, beginning in 2000, the ability to sustain the approach at the core of the partnership model is compromised. There is a disconnect between social development goals and an increased demand for measurable outcomes and results-based goals. The latter leaves little room for experimentation and risk taking—elements needed for continued development and innovation of literacy partnerships and practice. An example of the emerging concern with this trend is the increased focus on essential skills. A study sponsored by HRSDC, *Essential Skills and the Labour Movement: A Research Report*, shows that the main view from labour representatives is that the Essential Skills Framework is narrow and does not represent the broad view of literacy that labour uses in its approach. (Folinsbee, 2005)

Literacy instructors and workplace educators will need to hold on to the practices of an approach based on the broader, social development notion of literacy for life despite the policy and funding shifts away from this model. They are well placed to play a lead role in preserving and promoting this vision of literacy.

A credible field

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.

The level of development of the workplace literacy field varies across the country. There is no doubt that provincial government support is a contributing reason—provinces such as Nova Scotia

and Quebec are good examples. However, the ability of practitioners to access professional development and training opportunities has also been a significant factor. When it comes to workplace-based programs, employers and labour look for an educational partner that has the broad based experience needed to develop a program to address their needs. The NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program recognized this early on and encouraged and funded initiatives to support the professional development of the field. For example, unions partnered with literacy instructors and labour educators to design peer tutor training programs. In addition, they produced curriculum development tools and workshops to share the ‘labour approach’ with literacy practitioners not yet familiar with the dynamics of workplace-based programs. This case study points to the need to recognize practitioner training and development as a key component of any literacy strategy. Building the credibility of the field will ensure that literacy can take its place as a legitimate component of Canada’s education system.

A platform for advocacy

There seems to be little disagreement that literacy is an important issue. The 2005 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS) pushed literacy out of the margins and forced governments, at all levels, to state that more must be done to address the literacy needs of Canadians. At the same time, two recent reports have called for a Pan-Canadian literacy strategy: the 2003 Report of the Standing Committee of Human Resources Development, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, and the 2005 Ministerial Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills Report, *Towards a Fully Literate Canada: Achieving National Goals through a Comprehensive Pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy*.

Yet the adult literacy sector still finds itself having to make the case for literacy. There is little or no core funding for community or workplace-based literacy. The sector is dependent on project funding, and even that funding has been cut back and its scope severely restricted by the current federal government. The federal cuts have led to a broad based campaign in support of literacy

programs. Practitioners can use the findings of this case study to point to a concrete example of what works and call for specific policies and programs that build on the approach pioneered by the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program.

Implications for Policy

James E. Page, former Executive Director, National Literacy Secretariat

When the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program began in 1990 federal literacy policy was based on the premise that increasing the quality of the literacy skills of the Canadian population would have a beneficial effect on the nation's social, economic, cultural and citizenship development. This policy proposition is still well grounded in research today. For example, evidence suggests that literacy provides access to opportunities to learn, to find better employment (Boothby, 2002) and to earn higher financial rewards (Osberg, 2000; Green and Riddell, 2001). In addition, literacy also affects a person's social status, level of citizenship and community participation, linguistic vitality, cultural involvement, access to health care and social services, and more (OECD and Statistics Canada, 1997).

The Program was also based on the understanding that the Canadian literacy policy field is intricate given our constitutional division of powers. The provinces and territories play a role given their mandate for education and training, while the municipalities are engaged through their support for community resources such as libraries and schools and delivery of social services that have a literacy component to them. The federal government's economic and social development mandate means that it, too, has policy interests. Since literacy policy is made at every level of government, the Program was developed not only as partnership involving business and labour but also as one involving various levels of government.

Lesson 1: The strategic importance of multi-sector partnerships

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. Simply stated, governments seldom if ever act alone. This is especially so in pluralistic democracies in which governments depend on all sectors to contribute to healthy communities and prosperous economies.

Macro-economic concerns such as productivity, wealth creation, international competitiveness, and the economic security of Canadians traditionally dominate the federal agenda. Research shows that the more literate a society becomes the higher is its productivity and standard of living (Coulombe and Tremblay, 2004). Studies confirm that enhancing literacy skills leads to increased labour market participation and stronger national capacity to compete in the global economy (OECD-Statistics Canada, 1997; Shalla and Schellenberg, 1998). Literacy has become a prerequisite for the acquisition of the new and emerging workplace skills that people need for employment and prosperity in knowledge-based economies. This case study demonstrates how these federal policy objectives have been translated into program design and multi-sector partnerships.

Federal involvement in the Program was based on a commitment to enhancing literacy as a way of improving 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 multi-sector partnership tactics used to achieve the federal policy objectives. These strategic tactics helped to enhance literacy and essential skills in order to increase productivity, competitiveness, wealth generation, and economic security.

Lesson 2: Government must make its “big picture” policy objectives known

“The IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) defines literacy in terms of a mode of adult behavior...”

Bloom, M. and Lafleur, B. (1999). *Turning Skills into Profit: Economic Benefits of Workplace Education Programs*. The Conference Board Inc.

The case study also reveals that to realize program objectives the government must explain its “big picture” policy interests. Part of the success of the foundation building and development and demonstration years of the Program lies in the fact that the government took time both to research the implications of literacy for the economy through, for example, its support for the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the more recent Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLSS), and that the government also invested in the dissemination of those results to the partners and stakeholders to increase knowledge and spur further developments. The evidence presented here suggests that an appreciation of the “bigger picture,” and infusions of new knowledge helped the Program to bring often-opposing interests together. By providing a broad environmental scan of literacy, the federal government encouraged joint action to realize its strategic policy objectives.

Lesson 3: The importance of policy steadfastness

The case study also demonstrates 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 that this objective was accomplished in the initial periods of the Program by a skilful, long-range focus on multi-sectoral partnerships and by a commitment to involve employers, employees, governments, and literacy providers. The foundation building period of the Program used the workplace “as an innovative venue for advancing literacy”. The development of a cadre of trained workplace instructors gave credibility to workplace literacy as a legitimate adult learning enterprise. During the period of development and demonstration, the commitment to collaborative multi-party partnerships and the workplace venue remained unshaken. For example, government-sponsored policy conversations were held that provided national forums for key

stakeholders resulting in increased intersectoral and multi-sectoral investments in the government's strategic objectives for literacy.

Consistency of effort resulted in the continued growth of respect and trust between and amongst labour, business, educators as well as the provinces and territories being accorded due recognition for the contributions they were making. Over time, this steadfastness built a willing coalition of partners committed to working in concert to advance the clearly stated literacy policy agenda of the government. The importance of policy steadfastness became evident when, in the period of program change, there was a shift to a top-down accountability ethic that altered the dynamics of the Program leading to a loss of commitment and a decline in trust. The evidence suggests that the policy objective of achieving literacy gains in the workforce and the workplace became secondary to the management preoccupation with accountability. The policy lesson is that in spite of the importance of strong and appropriate financial probity (the means) government can only succeed if it retains a commitment to the bigger policy picture (the ends).

Implications for Research

Swée Goh, University of Ottawa, School of Management

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. These findings can provide researchers with a foundation for further ideas in understanding the partnership process. As researchers are interested in generalizability of results, one such implication would be in studying how the partnership process unfolds. Is there a broad conceptual or theoretical framework that can fit this process? How can the findings from this study provide some preliminary insights of how the partnership process occurs in a different context such as in small to medium size enterprises in the private sector? Results from this type of

investigation can then add to our knowledge of how to manage the partnership process more successfully.

Some Research Questions from the Findings

“Education institutions are developing closer connections with industry to find ways of best meeting their needs” (p. 6).

Saskatchewan Labour
Force Development
Board. (2001). *Growing
our own workforce.*
Saskatchewan Labour
Force Development
Board.

The findings from the data that was gathered in this case study show that successful partnerships move through a number of phases over time. At each phase, some factors are clearly important to move this process into fruition. Some of these include the importance of developing a shared vision and having common goals. The findings also found that some common ground rules and having mutual trust and respect are also important to making the partnership successful. Having a balance of power between the partners and transparency in the relationship were also important success factors. Some dynamics were also important such as clear leadership from the funders and partners being comfortable in taking some risks. Just as important was the need for openness and trust in negotiating any issues and developing ownership of the projects and accountability.

Key stakeholders were also interviewed in this study for their views about partnerships that did not work. Some concerns such as conflicting objectives and hidden agendas were seen as factors that could lead to an unsuccessful partnership. Other factors raised included the lack of agreement about basic working principles and a change in direction of the partnership goals without consensus can lead to broken trust and feelings that there is a lack of honesty and can precipitate power struggles for control. Two other factors that could lead to an unsuccessful partnership are the loss of key champions and uncertainty about funding. Lastly, unclear information flows among partners can also be detrimental to the partnership relationship.

These findings raise some interesting research questions. 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? Are they interrelated to some extent or is there a sequence? Is the development of an acceptable and effective information sharing system and expectations of how and what information is to be

available to all partners at the start contribute significantly to building openness and trust? 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? Is this an important antecedent to developing greater connectedness between the partners and will this also prevent power struggles for control when problems arise during the partnership? If there is proper investment of time and effort to building goal consensus and commitment to them, will it result in less likelihood for deviant behaviours by one party and less conflict about changes to them?

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, actions, and outcomes that could affect the overall success of the outcome. But how are these two research issues or questions related?

A Life-cycle Perspective of Partnerships

“When you’re starting out, you need to cherry pick the partners.”

LITERACY EXPERT

One fruitful conceptual approach to linking the 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 (Liao, 2006; Geroski, 2000; Dodge, Fullerton and Robbins, 1994; Hanks and Watson, 1993; Quinn and Cameron, 1983). For example, 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 (Jawahar and McLaughlin, 2001; Van De Ven and Poole, 1995).

More importantly, the life-cycle perspective also builds in that each phase has its own crisis potential and needed resolution in order for the growth or change to continue (Lester, Parnell and Carraher,

“There must be strong management commitment to make literacy program work” (p. 55).

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

2003; Drazin and Kazanjian; 1990; Miller and Freisen, 1984; Churchill and Lewis, 1983; Kimberly and Miles, 1980; Adices, 1979; Greiner, 1972). This fits into relating the factors identified in this 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. In this way the life-cycle perspective can address the question of not only of what factors are important in what phases but begin to build theory around explaining why they are important to each phase of the partnership process which is the relatedness issues raised earlier.

This study as discussed has useful and significant implications for research not only in the area of business labour partnerships in building workplace literacy but also in furthering our understanding of the partnership process in general. The life-cycle perspective that has been drawn from the findings of this study, for example, will allow for further more focused research in this area.