

## Articles

# ADULT LITERACY IN NOVA SCOTIA: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF POLICIES AND THEIR EFFECTS

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this research is to examine the current adult literacy policies and practices in Nova Scotia and how they affect adult students in this province. Particular attention is paid to the provincial government's involvement, especially through the Nova Scotia Adult Learning Act. The authors use case studies (composites) to analyze several categories of adult participants: disabled adults who seek literacy training after a job loss and single mothers trying to complete the General Education Development (GED) process after dropping out of school. Using these categories, the authors show the obstacles to be overcome as adult literacy learners deal with community-based, provincial, and national bodies and levels of government to realize their goals. The authors conclude with recommendations regarding adult education and the implementation of the new Adult Learning Act.*

### Résumé

*Le but de cette recherche est d'examiner les politiques et pratiques actuelles en matière d'alphabétisation des adultes en Nouvelle-Écosse ainsi que comment elles affectent les étudiants adultes dans cette province. Une attention particulière est accordée à la participation du gouvernement provincial, en particulier par la Loi sur l'éducation des adultes en Nouvelle-Écosse. Les auteurs utilisent des études de cas (composites) pour analyser plusieurs catégories de participants adultes: adultes handicapés qui cherchent une formation d'alphabétisation après une perte d'emploi et mères célibataires essayant de terminer le processus général du développement de l'éducation (GED) après avoir décroché du processus scolaire. En utilisant ces catégories, les auteurs montrent les obstacles que les adultes*

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*apprenant l'alphabétisation doivent surmonter avec les organismes et paliers de gouvernement communautaires, provinciaux et nationaux afin de réaliser leurs objectifs. Les auteurs concluent avec des recommandations relatives à l'éducation des adultes et de la mise en œuvre de la nouvelle Loi sur l'éducation des adultes.*

On December 10, 2010, the *Nova Scotia Adult Learning Act* ("the Act") (Nova Scotia House of Assembly, 2010) received royal assent and was made into law. The Act, which is in its implementation stage, puts the onus on the Government of Nova Scotia to develop a strong, broad-based approach to adult learning to fill gaps in the current system. This is a precarious stage of development, as the early focus of the Act is on improving adult literacy for skills development without taking adequate account of the wider contexts of adult learning and the barriers that exist for citizens to access literacy and other programs. We believe that the Act needs to be considered within the broader context of government policies and funding and that any policies, practices, or regulations coming out of the Act need to keep the current socio-economic context in mind. This article begins to address this need by focusing first on a brief history of adult education efforts in Nova Scotia, then moving to a discussion of the literature on literacy initiatives generally. We finish this section with a discussion of the Act. To highlight impediments ingrained in the system, we provide two typical cases of Nova Scotians coping with literacy issues. The paper concludes with suggestions to strengthen the efficacy of the Act.

### **Literacy in Nova Scotia's History**

In many jurisdictions in North America, literacy levels or competencies have come to be measured in economic terms (see Rubenson, 2005). This is somewhat unsettling with regard to Nova Scotia, since we have had a strong historical tradition in adult literacy for citizenship, at least with regard to our white British citizens. One needs only to consider the groundbreaking work of Nova Scotia-born Alfred Fitzpatrick, who founded Frontier College (Cook, 1987), a national effort on the railway frontier to educate workers on site, and which exists today in the inner city, again reaching the vulnerable. More memorable yet is the work of Fathers Coady and Tompkins and Sisters Irene Doyle and Dolores Donnelly, who were leaders in the Antigonish Movement's project of economy and community building in eastern Nova Scotia in the early 20th century (English, 2009; Neal, 1998). We have a rich history of working with adult education principles to create viable communities with strong, literate citizens through study clubs, workers' organizations, and increased general citizen participation, in essence combining literacy with our community development work (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012; Welton, 2001, 2005). Nova Scotia is also home to Guy Henson, who was involved with the development of the regional library system, which encouraged reading and citizen participation in the life of our communities (Welton & Lecky, 1997). Clearly, Nova Scotians have done a great deal to use adult education as an important tool to improve literacy and strengthen the community. Indeed, literacy in this province has often been championed in the labour movement and through initiatives to empower workers (Frank, 1999; Spencer & Taylor, 2006).

Although there is a scarcity of critical research on literacy in this province, we know that such direct efforts to reach people at the community level have diminished over

time with an increasing trend to supporting higher education—Nova Scotia has more than 10 degree-granting institutions. This is concomitant with a global trend to furthering the goals of credentialing and professionalization (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Canadian literacy scholar Allan Quigley (2006) has written about how the allure of credentialing has infiltrated even the field of literacy. Yet this is not the whole story of the interests of literacy practitioners. Nationally, there are hopeful signs of nascent literacy networks and centres of inquiry to research effective strategies and increase literacy rates (Taylor, Quigley, Kajganich, & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2011; Taylor & Blunt, 2006), though some of these have failed due to funding shortfalls.

### Literacy Issues in Canada

The definition of literacy is a moving target as its meaning shifts temporally, so the terms literacy, adult education, and training are at times used interchangeably. Darville (2002) points out that there have been two waves of literacy research in Canada. The first tied literacy to “issues of public order” (p. 61) while the second tied it more to “efficient and competitive work organization” (p. 62). The *Adult Learning Act* (“the Act”), discussed below, makes it clear that literacy in this province is indeed tied to the second wave, the knowledge economy.

Particular groups are especially affected by literacy issues. Low literacy levels are disproportionately found in the ranks of the unemployed (Campolieti, 2011; Murakami, 2011) as well as among women who are single parents and poor and who are sometimes unable to access and complete literacy classes, at times because of violence in their home situations (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010; Horsman, 1999). Single mothers on income support have innumerable challenges that make access to jobs and education virtually insurmountable (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010). While these are individuals with actual issues, it is sometimes convenient to frame them as policy problems and on occasion to send funding their way through ad hoc arrangements and programs, which do not constitute actual policies with long-term implications. As a response to a particular situation rather than a proactive position, ad hoc funding typically addresses “a” problem, not “the” problem. Furthermore, ad hoc funding tends to identify groups such as single mothers as problems and target them in a way that further stigmatizes them (see Gazso & McDaniel). The unemployed, in general, have significant issues in accessing literacy and education programming, and when getting ahead might even be penalized (Campolieti, 2011; see also Dostal, 2004).

The working poor, often referred to as low income by government, are also at great risk for literacy issues (see Rubenson, 2005), which raises critical literacy questions for those concerned about addressing such issues. For instance, for a person in the working class, attaining higher literacy levels once they are already employed raises critical questions about the relationship of people to work. Paul Willis (1981), in *Learning to Labour*, provides strong insight into this dilemma: “Ironically, as the shop floor becomes a prison, education is seen retrospectively, and hopelessly, as the only escape” (p. 107). For the government, helping the working poor has mixed results, since the government depends on them to keep its particular economy running. This calls to mind David Harvey’s (2000) contention that “capital requires educated and flexible laborers, but on the other hand it

refuses the idea that laborers should think for themselves” (p. 103). There is little in the current system, including the new *Adult Learning Act*, to suggest that literacy is oriented to criticality. Although the Nova Scotia Government (2009) has focused on this population, it is not clear that it has delved deeply into the implications of education for particular groups. This is evidenced by situating adult education within the Department of Labour and Advanced Education (DoL); in the many government policies that underscore learning for earning, there is little to suggest a critical education is even being considered.

In Nova Scotia, many jobs—particularly in the tourism industry, which contributes over \$2.02 billion to the provincial coffers (Nova Scotia Department of Economic and Rural Development and Tourism, 2013)—are seasonal. The fishing, agriculture, and forestry industries are also dependent on seasonal workers. If this group is the object of literacy initiatives, the government must be prepared for the repercussions.

Nova Scotia is not alone in having literacy issues, though it is one of the first provinces to actually promulgate adult learning legislation to begin a concerted effort to address them, knowing that any efforts are tied to measurement on an international scale. As the world becomes more globalized, literacy skills are not determined provincially, or even nationally, but at an international level through such powerful organizations as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In 1996 and 2003, Canada took part in an OECD study known as the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) (see OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005). Canada, and particularly eastern Canada where Nova Scotia is situated, emerged from this study with mixed reviews. Grenier et al. (2008) point out: “Although Canada has one of the highest levels of average literacy skill among OECD countries [OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000; 2005], many adults do not possess the requisite level of skill observers believe are needed to maintain competitiveness in an increasingly global knowledge economy” (p. 18).

Also commenting on the issue, the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (2011) noted “the strong link between literacy levels and a country’s economic potential” (p. 1). To this they added, “The IALS [International Adult Literacy Survey] results told us that as much as 43% of the population between the ages of 16 and 65 are at Levels 1 and 2. This means they do not have the foundational skills that are needed to learn new skills or gain new knowledge” (p. 2; see also Taylor et al., 2011). While the overall goals and purpose of the ALL are open to much debate and interpretation, any low assessment of literary skills is problematic in terms of how it affects the development of the workforce and, as important from an adult education perspective, the development of a fully engaged citizenry. Consequently, it is important to understand related government policies and practices in Nova Scotia apart from the Act.

### **Nova Scotia Adult Learning Act**

Like most government acts, the *Adult Learning Act* is a broad-based statement of principles and ideals that the government will eventually concretize in practice. The teeth of the Act will be the accompanying regulations, not yet released, that will make it useful for Nova Scotians facing literacy issues, like the ones we profile below. Instead of being narrowly influenced by economic and fiscal imperatives of organizations such as the OECD, the

Nova Scotia government, we suggest, needs to look at organizations such as UNESCO that advocate for a broader understanding of adult education. For instance, the UNESCO report, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, written by Jacques Delors (1996), calls for a:

need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong education. Not only must it adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole human beings—their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and the ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role at work and in the community. (p. 21)

Until the passing of the Act, adult literacy practice in Nova Scotia had mostly operated without an official policy framework. Though in its infancy, and with its regulatory policies still being worked out, the Act signifies an important level of provincial responsibility toward adult literacy:

The purpose of this Act is to provide designated components of adult learning whose primary mandate is to support adult-learning programs and services to enable adult learners to develop their potential and acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy. (Nova Scotia House of Assembly, 2010, section 2)

With this opening gambit, the government is uniting social good with economic imperatives. The wording suggests a mixture of financial reward for the state and personal betterment for individuals, a position closely allied with neo-liberalism (see Campolieti, 2011; English & Mayo, 2012). The Act itself signals a commitment to adult education, including literacy, and, though by its very nature brief, it is a hopeful step for this province. The challenge from the left will be to influence these discussions and to ensure that the Act is implemented in a learner-responsive way. We expect that those in apprenticeship and trades training will also see hope in the Act's acknowledgement of adult learning, though our focus is primarily literacy.

The strength of the Act is the support it will provide those lacking basic high school education; as such, the cornerstone of the legislation is its statement of responsibility and support of the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning (NSSAL). Originally formed in 2001, NSSAL provides tuition-free education for students who have been out of school for at least a year and who are 19 years or older. The school, conducted in regional settings across the province, provides four codified levels of education. Level 1 is roughly equivalent to Grade 6, while Level 4 is equivalent to a high school diploma (Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning, n.d.). NSSAL is managed through the Adult Education Division, Skills and Learning Branch of the Department of Labour and Advanced Education. Previous to the Act, NSSAL operated without a specific framework or policy imperative, and as such its existence was quite precarious. With the Act, that situation changed.

***The Act within Nova Scotia***

The *Adult Learning Act* provides a portal to examine adult education in Nova Scotia, an immensely complicated task as there are multiple interpretations of the term *adult education*. It is often broken down, as acknowledged in the Act, into the classic categories of formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Coombs, 1973) and runs the gamut from highly structured learning activities to learning in the everyday sphere. Since the 1970s, the term *lifelong learning* has entered the adult education rhetoric with the intent of extending the reach of learning from cradle to grave. Although lifelong learning has extended the reach of adult education, this new argot has worked to narrow its focus, as Rubenson (2005) points out, to “become responsive to the labor-market’s needs” (p. 19). Equally contested is one of the most basic elements of adult education—literacy—which is interlinked with race and social class. This is especially true since literacy often involves citizens who have been marginalized by society, by the economy, and by the very system that they must negotiate to connect with and benefit from provincial literacy strategies and programs (Quigley, 2006). Though the Act does not specifically mention race, this clearly is an issue in a province that has sizable aboriginal and African Canadian populations as well as a large rural constituency, with less than half the population in Halifax and the rest spread out across the province (Statistics Canada, 2011). There is a substantial literacy issue in that “about 4 in 10 Nova Scotians are at risk of not having sufficient skills to fully participate in the workplace, family or community. [IALLS, 2003]” (cited in Literacy Nova Scotia, 2011, n.p.). Furthermore, there are serious social and economic issues given that some 8.7% of children live in poverty (Nova Scotia Government, 2009).

***Organization of Adult Education in the Nova Scotia Government***

Within the bureaucracy of the Government of Nova Scotia, adult education falls not within the Department of Education, as one might expect, but within the DoL. The DoL’s Adult Education Division, Skills and Learning Branch is “the Division [that] looks after funding, curriculum, guidelines for programs, resources for students, support and training for those who run the programs, and research to support the organizations” (Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education, 2011, p. 2). The positioning of adult education within the DoL sends a clear signal that the adult population has unique learning needs and barriers, separate and distinct from children’s learning. It also signals that adult learning in Nova Scotia, as in most other provinces in Canada, is focused on moving unemployed people into the workforce.

A related report published by the Nova Scotia Government in November 2010, *jobsHere: The Plan to Grow Our Economy*, provides important insights into how the government has positioned itself with regards to jobs and education: the government “can provide the leadership to bring together businesses, universities, unions, colleges, communities, non profits, co-ops, and the private and public sectors. It takes all elements of the economy working hard to make a better life for Nova Scotian families” (p. 1). The report further notes that “approximately \$60 million will go to skills development” (p. 3). Much is being staked on adult education and its potential contribution to the economy.

Clearly, much of the provincial government’s policy and instrumentation is geared toward, or tied to, a narrow band of adult education focused on economic imperatives

to the near exclusion of community building or civil society perspectives. Even though the government's attention to the economy may benefit all sectors and causes, it must be remembered that the provincial government is a minor player in a larger global economic web and, as such, it has to yield to governance imperatives it has little or no control over (Mayo, 2004). As well, the race- and class-blind nature of the Act and the various reports signals a direction that is product focused and that is not interested in the complexities of literacy for groups like the Mi'kmaq.

Alongside this official government response to literacy through the DoL's support of the Act are a number of community-based responses, local organizations, affiliated government departments, and federal initiatives that meet the needs of literacy learners in Nova Scotia. Discussion of these is incorporated into the next section, where we present two case studies of learners who are attempting to access literacy programming.

### **Effects of Literacy Programming on Citizens' Learning: Two Case Studies**

Beyond providing the NSSAL and supporting community groups that offer literacy programming, it is not clear that the Nova Scotia government has paid a great deal of attention to how adults enter and navigate the system, which is a maze of federal and provincial departments and regulations and which works mostly toward putting people to work. Any regulations that result from the Act will have to acknowledge the complexity of funding and provision arrangements. In this section, we take two categories of learners and examine how they are affected by the policies: (1) adults who need literacy training, are unskilled, and rely on government support, and (2) adults who are single parenting, unemployed and needing to complete the General Education Development (GED) process. We offer these as cases to consider when spelling out the regulations and practices that will make the Act practical and responsive to local needs.

The cases offered, while fictitious, are composites drawn from our experiences with everyday Nova Scotians. We chose to use composites because, as Gavey and Braun (1997) point out, they solve "ethical dilemmas" of identification. Composites draw on our reading of the literacy literature, our own experience of teaching literacy teachers in a graduate adult education program, our immersion in the life of rural Nova Scotia, and our participation on the governing boards of local literacy associations. The composites serve to highlight the complexity of literacy cases that need to be incorporated into regulations and policies following the Act.

#### ***Case 1: Lacking Literacy Skills***

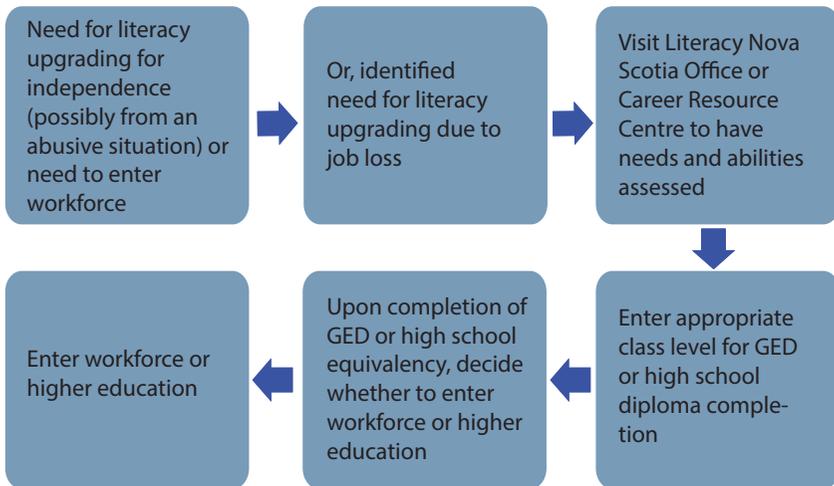
Here we take a fictional account of a typical Nova Scotian who lacks competency in some of the nine essential literacy skills identified by the ALL (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005; see also Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011): reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, computer use, and continuous learning. We examine briefly how the man in this case navigates the adult education system, as his is a test case of how the various policies and procedures in this province affect ordinary citizens.

Michael, aged 35, hurt his back while logging in Inverness County two years ago. He left school at the age of 16 to work in the woods, much as his two older brothers had done. Because he worked with a contractor and not at the main pulp and paper mill, he has no disability benefits, and he has a family to support. He is deemed to have no skills and lacks the basic literacy level necessary to enter a retraining program through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). He does qualify for possible transition funding from the government for the displaced pulp workers—the pulp and paper mill is soon closing for good—but he is having difficulty finding transportation to the literacy classes at the regional centre. It will be at least a year before he gets his high school equivalency, and though he is funded now, he is unsure if there will be a government program of any sort to fund completion of a trade at the community college. His only hope is that the new *Adult Learning Act* will be strong enough to provide the assistance and opportunities he needs to get back on his feet.

This is not a rare case (Campolieti, 2011). It represents the ordinary struggles of everyday people in Nova Scotia who do not have the literacy levels necessary to be fully active citizens. Michael's case raises a host of issues: transportation resources, long-term planning, and a lack of coordinated programs and supports. Not mentioned here is his inability to find a source/authority who can sort through the available government programs.

On the surface, it is relatively easy to draw up a flow chart for people like Michael who want to enter and navigate the system (see Figure 1). The difficulty arises when this chart is overlaid on the geography and culture of the province. Limited Internet skills and access complicated by a limited transportation infrastructure, further compounded by the dispersed location of educational facilities, are deterrents to his entry to the system. There are also the challenges of tuition affordability and the vast array of government departments to communicate with. In this case, the primary plan of action for Michael is to get into the system and then work out a method to stay there, but it will take a great deal of finagling on his part as there is no comprehensive plan for accommodating people like him. As the flow chart in Figure 1 indicates, the system is theoretically a simple process: Michael should visit a Literacy Nova Scotia Office or a Career Resource Centre, have his literacy ability assessed by a counsellor, and then enter the system, make his way through it, and eventually end up with a usable skill that will enable him to enter the workforce. Yet the barriers to access that Michael faces are as complicated here as anywhere (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Any regulations and policies that follow the Act must take these complications into account.

For someone like Michael, who is seeking to improve his literacy and skill level, the quickest way into the system is through one of the 32 Career Resource Centres that are funded through DoL and are disbursed throughout the province. These centres are instrumental in helping clients navigate the system. Although each is autonomous, the centres all offer the same services: training to work with computers and on the Internet, workshops on skills such as résumé writing, and consultation with case assessment officers

**Figure One:** System Chart of Adult Education in Nova Scotia

regarding long-term education goals. If further education is identified as a long-term goal, the client may be assessed for literacy level or be directed to institutions of higher education. There is one caveat: Career Resource Centres are set up primarily for the unemployed; employed people are not eligible for any of their programs.

Another entrance to the system is through Literacy Nova Scotia (LNS), a community-based organization founded in 1992 that receives 85% of its funding from the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills. LNS works well with the Nova Scotia government, providing contract services such as administering the Personal Development Fund and Assistive Technology Fund. The provincial DoL also sponsors some LNS events, such as Adult Learners' Week. Funding for LNS comes in the form of project funding, such as a service contract from the Rural Communities Foundation of Nova Scotia (Jayne Hunter, personal communication, November 4, 2011).

Once analyzed, processed, and provided with the literacy skills needed to be part of the system (the GED or a high school diploma), adult learners like Michael choose from an array of institutions and programs. One of the more popular, especially for those who want to gain or upgrade a skill, is the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) system, which is geared to "building Nova Scotia's economy and quality of life through education and innovation" (Nova Scotia Community College, 2006). The close link between economy and education is readily apparent from NSCC's mission statement. This is underscored in the Act, making it clear that the government has attempted to reconcile or unify its policies and directions—not in itself a negative, but when considered against the backdrop of a community of active citizens, is an issue (Campolieti, 2011; Gouthro, 2007). Michael has financial, health, and literacy issues, only some of which are addressed by an economic plan.

***Case 2: Unskilled and Relying on Government Support***

A second category of learner is the person who lacks skills, has multiple family responsibilities, has little or no income, and wants to complete the GED process.

Susan is a 24-year-old single mother living in public housing in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She dropped out of high school in Shelburne County eight years ago because she was pregnant and did not see any future for her and her baby in Shelburne. She moved to Halifax and has received income assistance through the Department of Community Services. For the last year, she has been trying to complete her GED through the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning. Though she pays no fees at the school, she needs child care and bus money. Things go well at school for the first few months, but her monthly stipend is not enough to make ends meet, her attendance drops, and she is so stressed she cannot do the homework.

Unlike Michael in the first example, Susan has the basic literacy skills needed to navigate her way through everyday life, but she does not have the educational qualifications or skills training to support herself (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010). Her literacy skills are strong enough to get into the system, but the biggest obstacle for her, and many like her, is having the money and time to stay within it. This is especially true for older learners and those with families, like Susan, who need to consider their children in every decision.

Students wanting to access higher education can use the usual student loan and grant system administered provincially by the DoL and federally through HRSDC. For Susan, this may be enough money to pay for her courses, but not enough to raise a child. She would also have to repay the loan, which would leave her in debt for the foreseeable future. Susan's experience with loans is minimal and she lacks the skills to find the forms and make applications. Furthermore, she does not have a home computer to do the required online searches.

HRSDC can be helpful for those who are recently unemployed and collecting Employment Insurance benefits, or for those who are underemployed. HRSDC will provide unemployment benefits to those re-entering school or will pay tuition or a combination of both. Unfortunately for Susan, she does not qualify as she has not worked enough hours to meet the minimum requirements. The Nova Scotia Department of Community Services will provide financial resources to those who have entered its system, but depending on the amount of money needed, an adult like Susan who is returning to school will have severe financial hardship. The other option for the adult learner is to work. To do so, Susan would have to pay for child care, cutting into her already stretched budget. Clearly, women, as the primary caregivers of children and elders, are more negatively affected by these policies than men (Gouthro, 2007). Any regulations and policies resulting from the Act would have to be multi-departmental in scope to meet the needs of single-parent learners like Susan (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010).

Another obstacle for learners like Susan is the availability of programs, many of which are not offered at the right time for adult learners. For example, LNS offers courses only from October to May; as well, some classes are offered during the day with no evening option. There is also the question of accessibility, especially for residents of rural

Nova Scotia who have poor public transportation services, if any at all. Though Susan lives in the city, she does not always have bus money to go to and from school or funds to pay a babysitter while she is away.

Susan's case is not unique to Nova Scotia. The CBC (2011) recently reported that "Newfoundland is the only province that provides enough social assistance for a single parent with one child to live above the poverty line. In every other province, welfare rates keep a single parent with one child living in poverty—sometimes just below the poverty line, but sometimes as much as \$5,000 below the low-income cut-off mark." Learners like Susan in Nova Scotia face great barriers in this regard. With a stronger support system, she could at least keep studying and work toward the qualifications needed to support herself and her child, who is among the 8.7% of children being raised in poverty in the province (Nova Scotia Government, 2009). Both Michael and Susan must also navigate the provincial (and at times federal) adult education system. Table 1 shows the principal government departments whose decisions affect education for returning learners, and highlights the fact that many of them are working as discrete units.

**Table One:** *Government Adult Education Departments*

Authority	Act or Policy	Program	Learners Directly Affected	Learners Not Affected
Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education	Adult Learning Act	Governs Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning; oversees Nova Scotia Community College	Low-income families; underemployed; workforce through programs such as Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS); oversees Nova Scotia Student Loans	
Human Resources and Skills Development Canada	Learning and post-secondary education, <a href="http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/learning/index.shtml">www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/learning/index.shtml</a>	Labour Training (1989); literacy and essential skills and education and training	Unemployed and underemployed	Those who have not worked enough to qualify for Employment Insurance benefits
Nova Department of Education	Education Act, <a href="http://nslegislature.ca/legc/statutes/eductn.htm">nslegislature.ca/legc/statutes/eductn.htm</a>	Has ceded responsibility for adult education to Department of Labour and Advanced Education	School-aged children; Halifax Regional School Board runs Flexible Learning and Education Centres (FLECs) program for students who have been out of school for at least a year ( <a href="http://www.hrsb.ns.ca/content/id/706.html">www.hrsb.ns.ca/content/id/706.html</a> )	Other than FLECs, most adult learners
Nova Scotia Department of Community Services	Continuing Education Program, <a href="http://www.gov.ns.ca/coms/families/provider/">www.gov.ns.ca/coms/families/provider/</a>	Focus on training of early childhood educators; part of mandate is assistance for vocational training income assistance and employment support	Low-income families	The non-poor, those who fall through the cracks

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is how to link the finances or policies of one system to another. From the perspective of Susan or Michael, these departments and programs are basically foreign. How they work together is also often a mystery to adult learners. Yet there are

indications that the Nova Scotia government is working to bridge some of the gaps for learners affected by poverty, as can be seen in the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services' (2011) *Statement of Mandate 2011–2012: Building Strong, Healthy Communities*:

The department is refocusing employment support services to better meet the needs of Income Assistance recipients to overcome fundamental barriers such as life skills. Directly connected to this development has been the creation of Labour and Advanced Education (LAE). LAE will play the lead role related to career development, advanced education and work force attachment programs. (p. 7)

The term *life skills* is unexplained. Since it is connected to the creation of LAE, it likely pertains to skills for the workplace, but the meaning is not totally clear. For the new Act to be useful to people like Susan, it must help connect various departments and policies. The government also needs to make sure that adequate resources are in place for her to actually succeed; without comprehensive efforts to coordinate resources and think across department lines, the Act will not be useful.

### Discussion

The Act will not necessarily improve access to adult literacy education in Nova Scotia. As these cases show, policy makers need to consider a bigger picture than adult classrooms when designing regulations to make the Act realistic and useful or, to use the classic adult education admonition, to contribute "really useful knowledge" (Johnson, 1988, p.3). We have drawn attention to how the economic, education, and social welfare systems interact and conflict, especially for those who need literacy upgrading. Conducting this research and identifying issues were complicated by the unavailability of information, lack of response to requests for information from government departments, and the general complexity of the interlocking systems and social issues. One wonders how an average adult literacy learner like Michael or Susan can navigate the system. For those who do not have the required literacy skills, including computer savvy, access is limited and success is difficult to achieve—a situation that the provincial government ought to pay particular attention to.

Literacy in Nova Scotia continues to be of great importance, and the people involved are doing important work to maintain and enhance the system. Yet important elements are missing from the current conversation, especially that of "critical understanding," which appears not to be highlighted in the Act but which needs to come through in the emergent regulations. The United Nations Millennium Project (2011) reminds us that "literacy is not the simple reading of word or a set of associated symbols and sounds, but an act of critical understanding of men's [sic] situation in the world."

As the Government of Nova Scotia develops regulations to guide the implementation of the Act, it needs to be careful not to take the lowest possible interpretation of this legislation. The cases of Michael and Susan put flesh to citizens' multiple needs. Each case suggests ways to promote a vision of adult education that is holistic and that provides a comprehensive and integrated support system for the learner as an active citizen.

While the Nova Scotia government, through its labour-market orientation to education, wants to increase employability and indeed is willing to offer educational opportunities to adults, it has not implemented a consistent and systematic approach to support this orientation. It needs to view cases like those described as opportunities to identify the many other supports that are necessary, such as a living wage, a streamlined access system, child care, and transportation support.

At present, the Act is government driven and mostly attends to the needs of the marketplace; the voices of community and special interest groups need now to be more strongly heard so they are fully integrated into the guidelines and policies. Along with the need for greater involvement of community groups is the need for greater government, national, and provincial funding to support the implementation of the Act.

Even the most basic of analyses shows that health, education, and geography are interlinked and that these have not been factored into the current conversation. The seeming isolation of education policies from others in this province is indicative of an atomized approach to planning. The people in the cases provided are typical of adults across Canada who believe that greater access to adult literacy initiatives will improve their opportunities in the workplace and allow for a better quality of life. Nova Scotians have the advantage of legislation that highlights the importance of adult learning, and they now have the opportunity to develop guidelines and policies that will help the Act reach the needs of communities. A Western democracy should be capable of this. We challenge our government to meet the demands that Michael and Susan ask of them.

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