



***Opening Speech: Senator Lillian Eva Dyck
Council of Ministers of Education of Canada
Pan-Canadian Web-interactive Literacy Forum
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Veterans, Elders, Ministers, Chiefs, Adult Learners, members of Literacy organizations, registrants. As a member of the Senate of Canada, I welcome you to this unique forum. I am pleased and honored to provide opening remarks.

As you all know, literacy proficiency is the daily ability to understand and to use printed material at home, at work and in the community. Level 3, of the five levels, is considered to be the minimum requirement for someone to function adequately in our current modern, knowledge-based economy. Those of us who are below level 3 encounter barriers to full participation in Canadian society and usually cannot access the full economic, social or personal benefits of living in Canada.

First and foremost, let me emphasize why it is important to have good skills in literacy. Being literate – that is, having a reasonably good ability to read and understand various documents or other written pieces of information is a key ingredient in the recipe for living a successful and happy and long life.

Why is that so? Because being literate enables you to get a high school education or its equivalent, and then it enables you to get additional education at the post-secondary level. This in turn increases your chances of getting a job and increasing your income. Greater income in turn allows you to buy better food, to live in a better home, and perhaps to have access to better medical care.

Being literate increases your ability to understand everyday and complex information related to your health. All of the latter increase your state of health, and in the long run, you live longer than someone with low literacy skills. In fact, it has been reported recently that those of us with a post-secondary education live up to 7 years longer. This is a rather significant increase in lifespan. It was stated

that “the single best predictor of good health and longevity is probably literacy”.

But the bad news is that far too many Canadians have less than adequate literacy skills. According to the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, known as the IALS survey, 41 per cent of Canadians scored below level 3 in prose literacy, while in Saskatchewan a smaller percentage, 33 per cent, scored below level 3. What this means is that 41% of Canadians and 33% of Saskatchewanites had significant difficulty in fully comprehending written documents related to daily life in our modern society.

Now, let me ask you this: How do you react to that information? Do you find it shocking? Does it upset you in any way?

1 in 3 people in Saskatchewan, approximately 200,000 people, between the ages of 16 to 65 years struggle with everyday reading. These people are not to blame for this. They are in all likelihood just as intelligent as everyone else, but somehow our educational system has not worked for them.

It sort of surprises me that there isn't an angry crowd demanding that they have access to more literacy programs, so that they too can reap the benefits of completing their education, earning higher salaries, being better able to provide for their children, and enjoy a lifestyle that is healthier and longer. In a country like Canada, there is no good reason why such a large percentage of us have less than adequate reading and numerical skills.

Many, many reports have concluded that getting a good education is one of the best ways of breaking the cycle of poverty and overcoming the personal and social problems associated with poverty.

To succeed in your educational endeavors, you need good literacy proficiency. It has been estimated that if a person completes high school, they will earn an additional \$500,000 over their lifetime compared to someone who has not completed high school.

Furthermore, if they complete post-secondary training at the college or university level, their lifetime earnings increase by another \$500,000.

In order to complete high school or post-secondary training, and gain these enormous economic benefits, one typically must have at least level 3 in literacy proficiency.

Next I want to draw your attention to what the IALS survey found when they examined the literacy proficiency in off reserve, urban Aboriginals. In Saskatchewan, 60% of the off reserve Aboriginal population were found to have less than level 3 prose proficiency. One can estimate that about 22,000 Aboriginals in cities in Saskatchewan had less than adequate prose literacy.

When one compares the literacy proficiencies of the urban Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, a greater percentage of the Aboriginal population had lower scores. 60% of the Aboriginal population compared to 33% of the non-Aboriginal population had less than level 3 prose proficiency. While the difference between the two groups may appear rather large, is it really surprising given the socioeconomic environment that many urban Aboriginals face? An environment that is too often characterized by poverty. Furthermore,

for some Aboriginals, their own language - not English - was their first language. One cannot blame Aboriginals as a group for their lower literacy proficiency. Aboriginal people are just as capable intellectually as non-Aboriginals. I think that it is important to point this out explicitly, because if I were told that I had less than adequate literacy skills, I might feel that it was my fault and that either I wasn't as smart as everyone else or people might think that I wasn't smart.

In fact, one of the dangers of comparing different groups of people is that you run the risk of upsetting or offending the group that rates lower on whatever characteristic is being measured. Many studies have been conducted on the Aboriginal population; and, unfortunately too often the results are interpreted in such a way that Aboriginals are seen as deficient compared to non-Aboriginals.

So when talking about the IALS survey which does compare Aboriginals to non-Aboriginals, we would be wise to take into account that there may be some feelings of anger or personal inadequacy, because, this is yet another study in which Aboriginal people rate lower level than non-Aboriginals. Studies such as this have an

emotional impact, and perhaps we all ought to be more explicitly conscious of this, and talk to each other about it.

In fact, it is a reality that there still are people in mainstream society who consider Aboriginals to be inferior to them. In our society as a whole, we condemn discrimination on the basis of race, but racism still exists and its effects - even for so-called subtle forms of racism, can be very damaging. Let me give you a glimpse into the impact of living in a predominantly “white” society that believes Aboriginals are inferior or deficient.

For most of my life, I felt inferior because of my racial identity. I was ashamed to admit that I had Cree Indian blood running through my veins. I was afraid that if people knew that I wasn’t just Chinese, and that I was also Indian, they would look down on me even more so. And believe it or not, it wasn’t until I obtained a PhD that I had the self-confidence to admit my dual heritage. I was 36 yrs old at the time, and, I still felt that as Dr. Lillian Dyck I was really only equal to Mr. White Man.

I tell this personal story not to make you feel sorry for me or to make anyone feel bad, but to illustrate how insidious the effects of racism can be on one's feelings of self-worth. But I was lucky in that I was very good at reading, writing and mathematics, and I was able to succeed in school. Having a good sense of self-esteem or self-worth makes learning easier.

Now with regard to the magnitude of the differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, I think that before we accept this as a true reflection of reality, we must ask whether the IALS test was accurate or appropriate, especially within communities where English is not necessarily the first language used at home. We ought to question whether the testing under-estimated literacy proficiency or whether the results were completely reliable or appropriate. We should not accept the results of the IALS survey carte blanche, but should question how it was done, its accuracy and what it means.

Was the IALS survey appropriate for use in assessing the literacy of Aboriginals? This forum may well give us some answers to that

question. It is well known that Aboriginal people are masters of the oral tradition and historically Aboriginals did need to depend on written communication as is the case for Europeans. The IALS survey did not assess oral proficiency, nor did it take into account cultural differences. So It is fitting that the regional theme for the forum here in Saskatchewan is Aboriginal Literacy: More than words, and I look forward to hearing the ideas generated around this theme.

I want to provide some information to you about the differences in the demographics of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. The non-Aboriginal population has a low birth rate and consists mainly of aging or greying baby boomers. By contrast, the Aboriginal population is younger and growing in numbers at a faster rate. In 2001 in Saskatchewan, about 60 per cent of Aboriginals living off-reserve were under the age of 25, compared to about 30 per cent for the non-Aboriginal population. In other words, the proportion of people under 25 years of age was two times higher in the off-reserve Aboriginal population than in the non-Aboriginal sector.

It is particularly important to ensure that the Aboriginal population, which has proportionally more younger people and which is growing at a more rapid rate, has the requisite literacy skills to succeed in getting their education and breaking out of the cycle of poverty.

But how many adult learners are being helped by literacy programs in Saskatchewan? Based on information that I received from the Saskatchewan Literacy Commission about a year ago, a mere 2,000 adult learners were participating in federally funded literacy programs in Saskatchewan. In addition to the 2,000 learners participating in federally funded literacy programs, about 5,000 were accessing provincially funded programs. The total number of learners – 7,000 - is only a tiny fraction — about 3 per cent — of the huge number of people — 200,000 to 250,000 — with low literacy in our province. This level of literacy programming is not sufficient to make a significant difference in the literacy scores for the province as a whole. Much, much more programming has to be offered.

It is interesting to note that other countries, such as England and Australia, have launched multi-year, well-resourced national strategies aimed at improving literacy skills. Canada ought to follow

their lead. Furthermore, in Saskatchewan, close attention should be paid to the growing Aboriginal population.

It has been predicted that 10 years from now, 21 per cent of the population in Saskatchewan will be Aboriginal, and by 2045, as much as 50 per cent will be Aboriginal. It is imperative, therefore, that programs that increase the literacy proficiency of Aboriginals are, if anything, expanded dramatically. In addition, such programming ought to be designed by and for Aboriginal learners. It has been shown that literacy programs that are designed with the particular group of adult learners in mind are more effective.

Federal and provincial governments ought to increase their levels of investment in literacy programs. It is the right thing to do; furthermore, such investments will pay significant dividends in the future, as more people become able to participate fully in everyday life, and contribute to our economy. These Adult learners will benefit from an increased sense of pride, greater self-confidence, a higher standard of living and a longer, happier life.

Finally, I will conclude by saying to those with less than level 3 literacy proficiency: Refuse to be silenced. Find your voice - don't be afraid to speak up and ask for what you rightly deserve. Be Courageous. Walk Strong, Walk Tall, and Walk Proud.