

# ***Ten Years of Adult Literacy Policy and Practice in Canada: Literacy Policy Tensions and Workarounds***

SUZANNE SMYTHE  
Simon Fraser University

## *Abstract*

The years 2003 – 2013 marked a coming-of-age in the adult literacy field in Canada, as it reconciled the politics of international literacy surveys and their accountability regimes with the actualities of literacy work among people caught in the nets of neoliberal economics. The concepts of policy networks, powerful literacies and workarounds are used to capture how educators attempt to escape or repair the effects of standardized accountability regimes to create new networks of adult literacy practice that reflect local learning needs and interests. The nexus of this struggle suggests consequences for the work of all educators within an emerging ‘new precariat’ and downgrading of public education spaces.

## *Introduction*

There is growing recognition among literacy educators and scholars who work in contexts as diverse as schools, communities and post-secondary adult learning programs that global education policy discourses are finding their way into their settings, shaping ‘what counts’ as literacy in instruction as well as how literacies will be assessed and programs and educators made accountable (Ball, 2012a; Hamilton, 2014). Understanding the construction of these policies, how they travel and their consequences for democratic access to learning, constitutes a promising new terrain for inter-sectoral literacy research. It is in the spirit of cultivating these conversations that I describe adult literacy policy and practice in Canada from 2003 – 2013. The time frame captures the rise and intensification of regimes of international adult literacy measurement, as well as accountability and curricular frameworks that define what counts as literacy, its purposes and ‘whom is worthy of investment’ (Ball, 2012b) in educational programs. These policies do not unfold in a vacuum; adult literacy educators and organizations are significant actors in adult literacy policy networks (Hamilton, 2014), engaging at times in strategic alignment with national and international governing bodies, but also in creative forms of resistance, forging new spaces for innovation and educational inclusion.

The goals of this paper are to explore the policy texts and discourses that shape the work of adult literacy educators in Canada, from the perspective of the author who has participated in these policy discourses as a literacy educator and researcher. While some of the policy discourses and texts presented in this paper cover well-traveled terrain for adult literacy educators, the goal is to consider these in light of the present moment, its uncertainties, and the possibilities for new conversations about literacy research, practice and social action. In addition, educators in other sectors may recognize similar policy developments in their own settings, thus opening conversations about the workings

of literacy policy across contexts.

I first elaborate the perspectives of new policy networks (Ball, 2012b), powerful literacies (Crowther, Tett & Hamilton, 2012) and workarounds (Campbell, 2011) that guide this policy analysis. I then describe the structural organization of adult literacy education in Canada by way of context for the ways in which policies and practices have unfolded. The key texts and policies addressed include the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey, known as the *ALL Survey* (Statistics Canada and OECD, 2005), the Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) Framework (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2013) and the interpretations and mobilization of these texts in the construction of a minimum literacy proficiency known as “Level Three”. The effects of these texts are considered as they are materialized in literacy testing and program accountability practices and in the context of growing precarity of work in Canada. I then cite examples of how adult literacy educators work around these policies and what these actions may suggest for new networks of equity-driven literacy and learning within and beyond adult literacy education.

The structure of the article is chronological in the unfolding of events over time, but is also an assemblage of rapidly changing policies, events and counter-movements that fold backward and forward upon each other, influencing how the past is constructed in light of current meanings, but also which texts and discourses resonate in particular moments in time. This account is thus “partial, superficial and very time sensitive” (Ball, 2012b, p. xii).

### *Perspectives*

#### *Policy Network Analysis*

Rather than conceive of policies as a set of stable, rational transactions enacted by state governments upon their populations, new policy network analysis attends to policies as “mobile”, tracing the often unpredictable movements and flows of policy texts and discourses as they travel across transnational and local spaces. As Ball explains, “[T]he focus on *mobilities* takes into account large scale economic and political changes on the one hand, and cultural changes and changes in identity and subjectivity on the other” (Ball, 2012a, p. 5), and can “assist in making sense of the workings of globalization and neoliberalism as the ‘economisation of social life’” (Ball, 2012a, p. 3). These issues of identity, subjectivity and aspects of social life are often rendered invisible or considered mundane in the context of policy governance. Yet as Larner (in Ball, 2012a, p. 5) argues, “it is the apparently mundane practices through which with the global is produced.” Thus, a concern in this article is how global policy texts and discourses reach into teaching and learning relations, into subjectivities and identities, and into the processes of equity and access in literacy education.

#### *Powerful Literacies*

Policy network analysis is complemented by the concept of “powerful literacies”, defined by Crowther, Tett, & Hamilton (2012, p. 3) as “the interventions and practices that attempt to enhance the autonomy and control of powerless learners and their communities over their environment.” According to Barton (2012), research in this vein may refer to people’s everyday textually-mediated literacy uses and practices, and also to

the discursive organization of teaching and learning (Barton, 2012, p. 1 in, Crowther, Tett & Hamilton, 2012). The concept of “powerful literacies” thus attends to the ‘mundane’ as a source of knowledge about the workings of policy networks, the kinds of literacies that are privileged and the experiences of learners and educators who are often sidelined by policy networks of transnational education governance (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Goodman, Calfee, & Goodman, 2013; Hamilton, 2011).

### *Workarounds*

I wish to demonstrate in this policy analysis that is within the very tensions and entanglements of literacy policy networks that new, perhaps more equitable, literacies pedagogies can emerge. I use the concept of the workaround (Campbell, 2011; Debono, Greenfield, Travaglia, Long, et al., 2013) to make visible how educators and learners participate in policy networks as powerful actors (Hamilton, 2014). This participation may take the forms of strategic alignment with dominant or privileged policy discourses, but also of circumvention and repair of policies that are seen to be unworkable in practice, or in conflict with professional and philosophical values. Adult literacy educators, like many ‘human service’ workers, regularly engage in workarounds such as problem-solving, improvisation, deviation, creative interpretation, shortcuts and so on (Debono et al., 2013) to make the unworkable ‘work’ and get things done in their local settings. Workarounds, when “discretion is seized rather than granted” (Campbell, 2011, p. 410) make visible educators’ power and agency within literacy policy networks and also draw attention to dissonances between policy discourses and the actualities of learning in local settings.

### *The Organization of Adult Literacy Policy in Canada*

There are many ‘fields of practice’ that fall under the umbrella of adult literacy education in Canada, due to the interdisciplinary nature of the field and Canada’s federal system of governance and legislative arrangements. For example, adult basic education oriented to secondary school completion and academic skills upgrading falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction and is provided in school boards, community colleges and/or teaching universities. Community-based literacy programs may be funded by provincial and federal government partnerships on a short-term basis (a fiscal year, for example, or part thereof), depending upon available funds. Research and pilot demonstration projects fall under federal jurisdiction, and are funded through one-time grants administered through the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), currently an agency within the Federal ministry of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

The Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN), a national hub for literacy research and public education that represents provincial and territorial literacy associations, observes: “[p]rovinces and territories are under no obligation to designate specific funds in support of core literacy programs. As a result, literacy services in Canada vary considerably in resources and accessibility from one region of the country to another” (CLLN, 2013, para 3). Ireland’s National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) report on international adult literacy policy similarly noted: “Despite [Canada’s] well-deserved reputation for research excellence in the field of adult literacy, Canada lacks

anything that could be considered a cohesive, coherent or systematic policy approach to adult literacy” (NALA, 2011, p. 21). Indeed, the Canadian context makes for an interesting case of how the adult literacy field in Canada is coordinated by a small cluster of powerful texts, in the absence of a coherent policy framework.

With respect to the work of adult literacy educators, as educator Kate Nonesuch observed, “[N]o one ever grew up saying, ‘I want to be an ABE/Literacy instructor’; it doesn’t appear in most job classification systems. It is irregular, part-time and in many places simply doesn’t pay. So why are so many deeply attached to this profession?” (Niks, Davies, Allen, McRae, & Nonesuch, 2003, p. 80). Indeed, adult literacy education requires multi-skilled educators able to navigate diverse contexts of practice. In the course of a day, week or career span, educators may find themselves teaching the phonology of the Roman alphabet for new readers and critical reading strategies for English 9; facilitating job search strategies for older adults, designing a youth digital story telling project, a computer literacy class for seniors or a workplace literacy program for newcomers. Advocacy, outreach, curriculum development, coordination of programs and of volunteers, maintaining community partnerships and reporting extensively on learner and program outcomes are core practices in addition to instruction. Perhaps, as Hamilton (2011) observes, it is this very complexity and un-bounded nature of the field that is its appeal: “These features are often the creative lifeblood of social change and challenge: much of what is contested in local struggles is the very meaning of what’s going on” (p. 58). There is much in the Canadian experience that resonates with Hamilton’s (2011) description of the adult literacy field in the United Kingdom:

As a field of policy and practice it is positioned within complex and competing political agendas including those addressing inequalities, stigma and racism, social inclusion and economic development. In addition, changing technologies destabilise the category of ‘literacy’ calling into question what counts as reading, writing. (p. 56)

I now turn to the transnational and national texts that have organized adult literacy education practice in Canada in the past ten years, with attention to how these are materialized to effect access and equity to literacy education.

*Texts, Discourses and Technologies Shaping Adult Literacy Education in Canada*  
*The Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) Study*

The International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995) and its derivative policy texts, reports and media representations (Walker & Rubenson, 2014) have dominated adult literacy policy and practice in Canada for over twenty years. In 2003, a second survey, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, also known as the *ALL Study*, was carried out in 7 member countries of the OECD. The international results were published by Statistics Canada and the OECD in 2005 under the title *Learning a Living* and the results specific to Canada were published in 2005 as *Building on our Competencies: Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (Human Resources and Services Development Canada & Statistics Canada 2005). This Canadian data was known as the *IALSS*.

The *ALL study* was designed to build upon the methodologies and data of the first IALS survey. The goal was to examine and compare skill gains and losses over the adult life span among the participating OECD member nations in order to better understand influences of work, education and other social factors on adults' skills. The study authors also hoped to lay the groundwork for an ongoing monitoring of adult skill levels in OECD countries, and to measure the effectiveness of adult literacy policy in terms of gains in the skills of the population in the time between the IALS (1994) and the ALL survey (2003). The underpinning human capital logic was that survey results could be used by OECD member states to invest in adult education in order to maintain the "supply" side of skills and so their global economic competitiveness. As the authors state, "The ALL approach allows one to gauge the efficiency of markets, which match the supply of and demand for skills" and "add to what is known about the scope of public policy in influencing the level and distribution of skills in society" (Statistics Canada & OECD, 2005 p. 27).

The survey adopted methodologies of Item Response Theory (IRT) within an information-processing framework<sup>1</sup>. Assessors implemented home-based literacy tests to 23,098 Canadians (HRSDC, 2005) who were asked to view a range of texts and respond to questions designed to measure prose literacy (narrative), document literacy (forms and work-related texts); numeracy and problem-solving. The texts and tasks can be understood as "as if" literacy or what Maddox (2014) calls "real fiction"; tasks that are carefully controlled for complexity and measurement purposes to look like something one may encounter in everyday life, but indeed is not. As Darville (2011) has observed, the tests asked participants to "locat[e] and combin[e] bits of information to perform predefined tasks" (p. 165); tasks which "do not describe actual literacy as used anyplace" and indeed "exist only through the testing technologies" (p. 165). Additionally, as St. Clair (2012) argues, testing was oriented to literacy as the consumption of texts (reading prose) rather than its production (writing), a limitation also noted by Hamilton and Barton (2000) in their analysis of the first International Adult Literacy Survey.

The *Building our Competencies* study results were published in terms of categories of adults in seven countries who fell into four levels of literacy proficiency (Level One – Level Four/Five) across four domains named as prose literacy, document literacy, problem-solving and numeracy. In spite of the different practices measured in each domain, the report on the Canadian results collapsed categories Level One and Level Two to argue,

Nationally, 48 percent of the adult population – 12 million Canadians aged 16 and over– perform below Level 3 on the prose and document literacy scales (about 9 million or 42 percent of Canadians aged 16 to 65). Level 3 proficiency is considered to be the "desired level" of competence for coping with the increasing skill demands of the emerging knowledge and information economy. (HRSDC & Statistics Canada, 2005, p. 9)

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<sup>1</sup> For accessible and detailed descriptions of the workings of IRT in the IALS and IALSS, see: Pinsent-Johnson, 2011 and St. Clair, 2012.



Reproduced in government press releases, public education campaigns by literacy organizations and media outlets, the effect of the “48%” figure was to simplify and re-interpret the study findings to claim that a large category of people were not able to contribute to Canada’s economy and society (Atkinson, 2013). This is captured in a statement from the Conference Board of Canada: “Four out of ten Canadian adults have literacy skills too low to be fully competent in most jobs in our modern economy” (Conference Board of Canada, 2013a, para. 2). Indeed, statistics cited ranged from 40% – 48%, often with no citation to original sources; the “40%” story had become a fact, and came to represent the rationale for literacy education in Canada (Hayes, 2013). But the categorization process had important, if counter-intuitive effects on access to literacy education for those designated as “Level Ones and Twos”.

### *Technologies of Categorization*

*From populations to individuals.* The ALL study was a population-level survey designed to describe distributions of skills *across populations*. As Hayes (2013) observed, “Neither IALS nor Essential Skills was intended to determine the abilities of an individual” (p. 23). However, the IALSS technologies of categorization are frequently and inappropriately re-contextualized to attempt to describe *actual people and literacy uses* in local settings (CLLN, 2012; Hamilton, 2001), so that people in literacy programs have come to be referred to as “Level Ones”, ‘Level Twos.’ For example, in the section ‘who are adult literacy learners?’ in the Ontario Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) tutor training manual readers are informed that, “[b]y reading the descriptions of the levels in the IALS report, you will easily recognize that most of the adults who come to our LBS programs fit within IALSS Levels 1 and 2” (LBS, 2013, para. 2). Accordingly, learners at IALS Level One are described as having “very poor literacy skills, where the individual may, for example, be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on the package” and Level Two learners, “can deal only with material that is simple, clearly laid out, and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. It denotes a weak level of skill, but more hidden than Level 1...” (LBS, 2013, para. 3).

These same descriptors circulate in literacy tutor training materials produced in other provincial literacy associations and ministries of education (Government of New Brunswick, 2012; p. 9; Literacy Victoria, 2011, para. 3), suggesting that even as the literacy field in Canada is characterized as lacking in policy cohesion, the practices of textual borrowing among literacy agencies, and the ease of access to documents on the Internet (even those written several years ago) make it possible for regulatory curricular and policy discourses to travel and materialize in diverse contexts. What is rendered invisible in these processes is a sense of adults as actual learners, workers and family members who may feel their literacy skills are just fine, and who use literacies for a diversity of roles outside of work. There is little account for the kinds of literacies and learning people may have access to, and that adults as learners have “spiky profiles” (Cooke, 2006; Hamilton 2011, p. 65); they may be more proficient in some literacy practices than others.

The original premise of the ALL Study, to inform policy about the role of access

to education and employment in people's "loss and gain" of skills, was supplanted by a concern for which individuals may be most worthy of investment in training, a discourse enabled by another technology of categorization, that of "Level Three".

*Minimum threshold: Level three.* In spite of making the case for literacy as a 'continuum of skills', the *Building Our Competencies* report felt it "important, for analytical as well as operational reasons, to define a 'desired level' of competence for coping with the increasing skill demands of the emerging knowledge and information economy" (HRSDC & Statistics Canada, 2005, p. 14). This took the form of the construction of a literacy threshold at "Level Three" with the explanation that "for the prose, document and numeracy scales, Level Three is considered to be the desired threshold or the minimum for persons to understand and use information contained in the increasingly difficult texts and tasks that characterize the emerging knowledge society and information economy" (HRSDC & Statistics Canada, 2005, p. 26). This interpretation was made in spite of the wide range between Level One (0 - 225) and Level Two (226-275). Levels Three – Five are represented in the score ranges 275 – 500, suggesting that the design of the survey weighted the categories so more people were likely to fall into Levels One and Two. It is difficult to reconcile the tensions between the methodological concept of a continuum of skills, and the interpretative concept of a minimum threshold. Although the intention was to move away from the inaccuracies of dichotomous constructs of literate/illiterate, in the popular discourse emerging from IALSS, 'below or above' Level Three' became a new literacy dichotomy.

Signaling a parting of ways with Statistics Canada in 2013, William Thorn, Senior Analyst and Manager for the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), stated that the claim that Level Three [is] the "minimum level required by an individual to function in a modern society and economy" is "manifestly false" (Thorn, 2013). After all, people of all education and literacy backgrounds participate in the labour market. Indeed, some researchers have observed that in spite of the Level Three rhetoric, "actual government programs tend to focus on the development of low-skilled labour" (Gibb & Walker, 2011, p. 389), a point I return to below in a discussion of an emerging precarious economy.

However devised, the idea of a "threshold" of employability and productivity has taken hold in Canada, with material consequences in the lives of people. For example, Atkinson (2013), in her policy and interview research with adult literacy educators in Ontario, found that adults in that province categorized as 'Level One' are subject to particular sanctions and regulations, such as mandated attendance in literacy programs to qualify for social assistance: "In the case of Ontario, this [Level 3] threshold becomes an indicator of 'employability' and produces a singular and problematic population who are subjected to coercive educational interventions" (Atkinson, 2013, p.ii). Atkinson argues that the introduction of mandatory attendance in literacy education fundamentally reshapes the equity-based mandate of community-based literacy programs, traditionally built upon principles of voluntary participation and learner-centred curricula.

Gardner (2011) has also argued that when the ALL/IALSS results did not demonstrate literacy gains in the Canadian population, funding to literacy programs for

the Federal and Provincial governments began to decline. She cites comments by the Federal Minister of Human Resources and Social Development that “we’re not convinced that programs [have] proved themselves with the funding they’ve had so far” (p. 4). This idea that literacy groups were to blame for the lack of significant increases in literacy levels between 1994 and 2003 suggests the confusion even elected officials experience in applying results of population level surveys to actual learners and programs. Nevertheless, this signaled a shift toward a more targeted approach to literacy funding oriented to ‘returns on investment.’

For example, the Conference Board of Canada, a national organization that carries out policy research in “corporate leadership, economics and human capital” for the country’s business leaders (Conference Board of Canada, 2013a, para. 3) has called for literacy training funding to be targeted to those designated as “nearly there” (close to upper Level Two):

A full 80 per cent of the “marginally literate” in Canada identified themselves as having “excellent” or “good” literacy skills.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to improve literacy among this group are cost-effective because this group has already achieved a basic level of literacy. Moving this group up to a solid level 3—considered to be the minimum “job standard” level that enables employees to cope with the demands of work—would be less expensive and involve fewer resources, per capita, than moving the group of employees with extremely rudimentary level 1 literacy skills up to level 3. (Conference Board of Canada, 2013a, p. 16)

Consequently, those considered to have the lowest literacy skills are also less likely to have access to literacy education programs, or if they do, these may be coercive in nature. The rationale for literacy investment shifted in the late 2000s to reflect the new fiscal context of austerity, following the financial crash of 2008/2009. Proponents of the IALSS, including Statistics Canada, and provincial and national literacy associations have expressed the “urgency of addressing adult learning” (Statistics Canada, 2007, para. 3) because Level Ones and Twos were more likely to be unemployed and earn less in lifetime earnings. However, in the wake of the fiscal crash and recession in 2008, literacy investment was framed not as an issue of income equality, but as a savings to government and taxpayers in costs to employment insurance, social assistance and other social programs needed by people deemed to have low skills (CLLN, 2012, p. 79). Of interest then, is how these discourses of ‘return on investment’ are instantiated in local literacy education settings.

*The LES/IALSS apparatus.* Enmeshed in the logic of IALSS, is the Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) framework. The LES lists nine literacy and essential skills deemed essential, or core, to work in the modern economy. The skills are presented as reading, numeracy, document use, writing (considered foundational literacy skills) as well as computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others and continuous learning. Hundreds of jobs in Canada requiring secondary school completion or less are defined according to the particular combination and complexity of literacy and essential skills required on the IALSS Levels One – Five.



The LES has become a powerful and ubiquitous organizer of adult literacy education work in Canada. Literacy programs are increasingly required to demonstrate learning gains after a three to six month training period according to the LES/IALSS framework. For example, “a) ‘clients’ became employed or b) how many levels up the IALS Levels ladder literacy skills increase based on pre and post-tests (from Levels 1 or 2 to Level 3)” (Hayes, 2013, para. 4). These learning gains are measured in IALSS-inspired pre- and post-tests such as the Prose Document Quantitative or PDQ, and/or the TOWES (Testing of Workplace Essential Skills). Pinsent-Johnson (2014) argues that these ‘spin off’ tests are designed for self-administration so that individuals ‘below Level Three’ who may believe their literacy skills are adequate for their everyday lives and work, will realize “that their skills may limit their opportunity in the future” (Murray et al., 2009, p. 53 in Pinsent-Johnson, 2014, p. 103). Pinsent-Johnson argues, “test results are intended to impel action. Instead of working on a macro policy level, the spin-offs are designed to work at an individual level so people can recognize their ‘problems’ and do something about them” (Pinsent-Johnson, 2014, p. 104).

An example of this IALSS/LES apparatus in action is offered by literacy educator Dee McRae in her weblog that documents the effects of a severe economic downturn on the literacy work she does in her rural, resource-based town of Houston, BC. McRae recounts the experience of “MM” [Man in the Middle] whose job at the mill is “disappearing from under him” (McRae, 2013, para. 11) and who, like many others, is stressed, fragile and working very hard to “make the transition as smooth as possible” (McRae, December 11, 2013 para. 5). McRae’s is one story of a man taking an online literacy test, but his story is also a window into the LES/IALSS literacy policy network, and how his global text travelled from Paris and Ottawa to rural BC in an increasingly precarious economy.

Houston is a forestry-based small town in northwest British Columbia. The town’s principal employer, Houston Forest Products, has recently closed, a trend experienced in many resource-dependent communities across Canada as resources dwindle and manufacturing moves offshore to lower-wage countries (Krzepkowski & Mintz, 2013, p. 1; Petigara, Parriquin, & Mintz, 2013). Many people in Houston have worked at the mill for 30 years, taking the well-paying jobs when they were in Grade Ten, and now, in their mid-40s, finding themselves looking for work in a job market that requires higher formal academic qualifications and offers less job stability.

MM is told by the regional employment office that he must write an assessment for ‘reading, document use and literacy’ and is given a website and a number to complete the ‘TOWES-type Essential Skills’ test at home. But like many Canadian adults, he does not have the required computer equipment and hears that he can write the test at the local community college where McRae works. This is permitted by the employment office with instructions “*Not* to assist the workers in *any* way with the assessment” (McRae, December 11, 2013. para. 4) as it would bias the results. McRae describes test-taking experience itself:

The tutorial at the start of the assessment has a baby-faced Sponge-bob style computer walk the test taker through all the special moves required for this particular assessment test. How to use the mouse to cut and paste, highlight and so

forth. (Do you recall the first time you used a mouse?) When the real assessment starts, Sponge-bob is long gone. The questions relate to workplace materials so language is no longer childlike, the documents have excess information and distractors, and chances are good that the first answer that comes to our Man in the Middle is obvious, but perhaps not correct. The answer then needs to be formatted in a way the computer understands. How do you write 68 cents when they give you a box and a \$ sign? \$0.68 or would \$.68 work? Certainly \$68 would be wrong, but for our worker who does not have a computer, I wonder how long he searches for a cent sign, or feels confused that the answer is in dollars [...]. What are the odds that the test score will reflect the actual skills of the worker? (McRae, December 11, 2013, para. 5)

MM's experience with the Essential Skills test references patterns of inequality in access to digital tools and practices; the test assumes fluency in the use of a mouse and the protocols of entering numbers into fields, scrolling, and clicking in the appropriate places. The additional burden of managing new tools creates more anxiety and the potential for error that is unrelated to MM's actual numeracy knowledge; indeed the test seems to be assessing his access to digital tools. But the stakes are high. If MM score is too low, he may not qualify for access to training programs oriented to higher paying jobs. This is one of the ways in which people's lives and work are becoming more precarious. Indeed, to what kinds of jobs are the laid-off workers at Houston Forest Products and many other Canadians, transitioning?

#### *The New Precariat*

Standing (2010), in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, merges the terms precarious and proletariat to describe an emerging global phenomenon of workers who are being pushed out of full-time jobs that provide a living wage and into a 'new precariat' of permanent flexibility, low wages, shift and on-call work and the expectation that one will need to constantly move to find work. Standing argues that the ideal of the 'flexible' worker is a creation of neoliberalism in which the inherent risks and insecurities of a capitalist market economy (stock market crashes, fickle corporate investments in industry and manufacturing, the constant search for cheaper and cheaper labour), are "transferred onto workers and their families" (Standing, 2010, p. 1). The result, he argues, is a new global class of people living in economic insecurity and deepening inequality with tenuous relationships to place. Canadian journalist and researcher Michael Valpy argues that the trend is already well established in Canada, as literacy and labour researchers have noted (Atkinson, 2013; Gibb & Walker, 2011; Jackson & Slade, 2008). Literacy educators will recognize the people he describes, "dependent for employment on the temporary work agencies that have become the engines of Canada's labour market, delivering just-in-time, roll-on-roll-off workers for a cut. Flexible employment, it's called. The new norm" (Valpy, December 31, 2013, para. 32). Lewchuk, Lafleche & Dyson (2013) found that 20% of the workforce in Toronto alone work in precarious employment, a 50% increase in the years 1994 – 2014 (p. 5). The authors link the rise in precarious employment to changes in the practices of large corporate and government employers:

Large corporations, a source of stable employment in the past, have repeatedly reduced their workforces. This was a result of technological change, increased contracting out, and extended supply lines, often extending to suppliers in other countries. Companies reorganize or disappear at an increasing rate, often the result of financial reorganizations, decisions to re-locate, the entry of new competitors or the failure to keep up with the rapid pace of innovation. (Lewchuk, Lafleche, & Dyson, 2013, p. 13)

Significantly, these factors are not related to the literacy skills of Canadians. Precarious employment is associated with the sector in which one works and racialized people, newcomers to Canada, younger and older people are more likely to experience precarious work (p. 30 – 32), suggesting processes of social exclusion and discrimination that are not factored into the human capital discourses of LES/IALSS.

The discussion so far attests to the power of the LES/IALSS apparatus to organize literacy education work in Canada. It may be argued that this global project of literacy standardization is at its apex, the field duly disciplined and aligned to human capital discourses and practices. Yet it is instructive to return here to Hamilton's (2011, p. 58) observation that "much of what is contested in local struggles is the very meaning of what's going on." This short history of the intensification of standardized adult literacy education also tells a story of how literacy educators resisted and worked around these policy discourses to seize spaces for "powerful" literacy work.

### *Workarounds and New Literacy Networks*

Quantitative research has often been the preferred way of measuring literacy. We are bombarded with statistics that paint the dire picture of the state of literacy in Canada. When practitioners are asked to present at meetings they are asked about percentages of success and failure. But qualitative research can often be where the meat of an issue is found—in the stories, words, and experiences of the very people who are involved with literacy learning and provision. (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 103)

In the wake of the publication of the ALL and IALSS studies, the Canadian government was interested to stimulate research activities to strengthen theory, instruction, accountability and professionalism in order to address the perceived lack of literacy skills among Canadians, which many attributed to the quality of literacy instruction. The Federal program, *Valuing Literacy in Canada* (VLC), sponsored over 60 research projects in literacy education, many for doctoral and postdoctoral students, but also for literacy practitioners to carry out inquiry in their practice settings, meet in national and local conferences, and publish their work. This effort became known as the Adult Literacy Research-in-Practice movement. Alkenbrack (2008) in her study of the movement in British Columbia, found that among the projects she reviewed, most addressed literacy teaching and learning from social practices perspectives, investigating the micro-politics of literacy education that were getting lost in the LES/IALSS discourse. Inquiry topics included the non-academic outcomes of learning (Battell, 2001),

literacies pedagogies to support women in the sex trade (Alderson & Twiss, 2003), how adults with little formal education learn (Niks, et al, 2003), the development of localized assessment and evaluation approaches that capture nuanced learning outcomes, literacy and capacity building in resource-based communities (Dougherty, 2006), writing strategies and more.

A watershed moment in the Research-in-Practice (RiP) movement was the establishment in 2003, *Literacies* a quarterly journal based at OISE and partially funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. The objectives of *Literacies* were to “promote writing about research in practice in Canada and to cultivate and develop writership among literacy and adult education workers” (Atkinson & Mollins, 2008, para 3). *Literacies* provided accessible, peer-reviewed research written by and for practitioners, creating a new space for educators to explore and articulate literacies as “powerful” social practices, linked to institutions, contexts, local knowledge and access. Its funding was discontinued in 2009 amidst austerity budgets in the wake of the 2008 recession.

Although a cohesive national Research-in-Practice movement has diminished, its ethos and goals have re-emerged in projects under the leadership of adult literacy educators and academics with strong roots in the Research-in-Practice movement and in community-based education, Audrey Gardner, an instructor at Bow Valley College in Alberta with a long history in the RiP movement, initiated the Adult Literacy Research Institute (ALRI) which collects and theorizes ‘stories from the field’ to articulate instructional practices and issues on topics such as supporting deaf and hard of hearing adults, violence and learning, women in correctional facilities, indigenous epistemologies and so on (Bow Valley College, 2013).

The Northwest Territories (NWT), Nunavut, and Yukon Literacy Councils have strong research programs using participatory and community-based research methods that explore literacies rooted in indigenous cultures and languages. The orientation of the research is to involve community members themselves in asking, ‘What constitutes literacy from the perspective of the people who live here?’ This research is funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) when it links to skills for employment, and these literacy councils have creatively linked their research to concerns and mandates shared with other agencies, including health, K-12 schooling and environmental research, creating new funding sources. The NWT Literacy Council has worked around significant challenges related to Internet access and access to digital tools to forge a pedagogy of digital storytelling in the North that engages youth in secondary schools and adult learning settings. One does not require the Internet to create a digital story, so the Council burned templates and resources onto CD Roms for distribution across Northern communities. They encouraged educators to see the rich literacies embedded in digital storytelling, and the alignment of the genre with indigenous oral storytelling traditions (Smythe, 2012).

In Nova Scotia, the Antigonish County Adult Learning Association (ACALA) has worked around the LES/IALSS framework to secure funds to provide adult learners with a ‘voice and a platform’ to make videos about social issues that affect their lives. ACALA recently formed a social enterprise, ACALATV, and completed a series of videos on housing affordability features in local film festivals. Adult learners were employed as trainees and then apprentices to learn video production, creating access to

new literacies, real-world work experience and opportunities for sustainable employment (Smythe, Toohey, & Dagenais, 2014).

The Community Development and Outreach Program at Capilano University in North Vancouver, BC, has for many years carved a space for literacy education rooted in local learning needs and interests. While the instructors are employees of Capilano University, they must fundraise to maintain their contracts and sustain community literacy projects. Although this contract-based approach to their work is unstable for educators and learners, program leaders have worked around this create a space for responsive literacy and learning programs that use participatory curricula development approaches and are strategically located: learning in a safe house for women in the sex trade, digital literacy in homeless shelters, writing outreach in local parks, family literacy in elementary schools and on First Nations territories, academic upgrading for jockeys at a local race track and leadership skills for newcomers based at a neighbourhood house. This work has produced invaluable resource guides, curricula, digital stories and other resources that articulate emerging practices in literacy education such as harm reduction (Alkenbrack, 2007), digital equity (Smythe, 2012) and leadership training (Coyne & Alderson, 2013).

#### *Epilogue: Literacy Policy 2014*

Many literacy organizations aligned with LES/IALSS discourse in the years following the publication of the *ALL Study* because they believed the findings made a case for investment in literacy education for adults with low literacy skills and could address income inequality. Yet the LES/IALSS framework shifted from a descriptor of literacy goals to a measure of individual literacy skill gains and of program effectiveness. This has created categories of people and community-based programs that could be abandoned in a ‘return on investment’ logic. Literacy skills and employment participation have been reduced to matters of personal choice rather than public policy. As Atkinson (2013) notes, these individual narratives recode the meaning of literacy, steering it away from “a tool for self-fulfillment [that] leads to participation in society” (Thomas, 1983), toward a set of measurable “information-processing skills” (Darville, 2011; Atkinson, 2013, p. 7-8).

In fact, there has been a steady decline in adult literacy funding in the years since the *ALL Study* was published. In May 2014, funding for the CLLN itself and all the provincial literacy associations was cut with little warning. Jason Kenney, Minister of Employment and Skills Development (ESDC) explained this sudden decision in this way: “Our government is committed to ensuring that federal funding for literacy is no longer spent on administration and countless research papers, but instead is invested in projects that result in Canadians receiving the literacy skills they need to obtain jobs” (Pearson, May 20, 2014, para. 5). As the Minister’s comment suggests, the value of literacy education that does not lead directly to a job, even a very low paying, unstable job, is now suspect.

#### *Conclusion*

Literacy policy is never just about literacy; its meanings and practices are formed and re-formed in a network of ever-shifting actors, texts and practices. LES/IALSS discourses traveled and shaped ‘what counted’ as literacy in powerful ways, helped along



by technologies of categorization worked into compelling sound bytes, such as the “40%” story. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the power of such stories may be amplified in the absence of a coherent and sustainable policy vision for adult learning in Canada.

Yet literacy educators and organizations also engaged in workarounds that reveal the ‘weak spaces’ of adult literacy policy and implementation. The few examples cited here link literacy learning to the production of texts with powerful social ends (such as digital stories, videos and other forms of production for publication). They also incorporate digital and multimodal literacies that are ubiquitous in everyday life and work but neglected by policy that disallows investment in digital tools, or regards “low-skilled” learners as not yet proficient enough to take advantage of them (Chinien & Boutin, 2011). These workarounds align literacy learning with local cultural and linguistic resources, including access to mentorship, apprenticeship and other real-world learning strategies: an issue ignored in IALSS/LES frameworks (Hamilton & Barton, 2000; Hamilton, 2014). Finally, they envision sustainable contexts for learning for participants; indeed, fluency and proficiency in new skills comes with sustained access to tools, practices and to mentorship, which is not possible in short-term, stop-go government funding regimes.

The particular assembly of practices and texts described here teaches us that educators and learners are powerful participants in policy networks (Pinsent-Johnson, 2014). Relationships between literacies, learning and inequalities among those at the margins, in the ‘new precariat’, are as yet poorly understood. Yet this group of people will likely grow, profoundly shaping the learning landscape for adults, youth and children, and the work of educators across these sectors. Creating even greater uncertainty, but also promise, are the rapidly changing literacies of an emerging digital culture, and the challenges of digital inclusion (Warschauer, 2003). How people create the learning spaces they want in the face of resistance, sanctions and shifting material conditions, offers insights into ‘the very meaning of what is going on’ (Hamilton, 2011) and offers glimpses into new networks of adult literacy policy and education.

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*Author Biography*

**Dr. Suzanne Smythe** is Assistant Professor in Adult Literacy/Adult Education at Simon Fraser University. Her research interests include adult literacy policy, digital equity and adult learning and the professional learning needs of adult educators.