



# Occupational Task Profiles: A Pan-Canadian Snapshot of the Canadian Literacy and Essential Skills Workforce: A think paper

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To download the Pan-Canadian Occupational Task Profiles: Canadian Literacy and Essential Skills Workforce go to: <http://www.literacy.ca/professionals/>

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## Topic

This think paper explores the following areas:

1. Literacy and Essential Skills providers have a role in ensuring the competencies of educators delivering Literacy and Essential Skills programs in the workplace
2. Competencies include characteristics that should be considered as well as qualifications
3. Dealing with the loss of experienced educators and the needs of educators new to the field – mentoring and observation

Reference is made to qualifications but the issue has been raised elsewhere and the focus here is on competencies, professional development, mentoring and observation.

## Terminology

For the purpose of this paper, the term **educator** has been used to encompass people within the workforce with titles of instructor, practitioner, facilitator or other titles that refer to teaching literacy and/or essential skills in the community and in programs delivered in the workplace.

The **competencies of educators** are the knowledge, skills, abilities, mindsets (tangible/intangible) and behaviours (savoir, savoir-faire, and savoir-être) that lead to learners buying into the program, learning, making progress and meeting their goals.

The term **professional development** does not refer to initial qualifications of an L/ES educator, but to the ongoing development of the educator throughout his/her career.

## Context

In the context of our work at CLLN, we know that Literacy and Essential Skills are not the content of everyday conversations across Canada and yet Literacy and Essential Skills are key to economic development. Because they are so very important, it is vital to know the competencies needed by the educators who deliver Literacy and Essential Skills programming. Much of the knowledge about literacy work in Canada has been informal and anecdotal. There has been little research that details this information and there was no overall picture.

Literacy and Essential Skills are crucial for labour market attachment. Low-skilled work has been most affected by technological change. There was a need to examine the competencies required by educators working in this field so that they can be recognized for the skills they possess and the impact they have on Canada's economic competitiveness. It is important to consider ways to move forward so that there is support for increased labour market attachment and increased skills. To this end CLLN undertook the following research.

## Occupational Task Profiles: A Pan-Canadian Snapshot of the Canadian Literacy and Essential Skills Workforce

[\*A Snapshot of Occupational Task Profiles: Canadian Literacy and Essential Skills Workforce\*](#) helps to enhance the perception and understanding of the important role of the L/ES workforce. It raises awareness so that educators can be recognized for their skills and the impact their programs can have on the Canadian workforce and Canada's economic competitiveness. CLLN is in the process of disseminating the *Snapshot* to the L/ES workforce; governments (federal and provincial/territorial); provincial and territorial organizations and other stakeholders. The *Snapshot*, which was released at the beginning of May 2012, provides information that could be used by administrators for the creation of job descriptions or for developing screening questions to be used during interviews with people entering the L/ES workforce. The *Snapshot* could also provide a basis for promoting the development of Occupational Standards for L/ES workforce or as background information for the development of National Occupational Classification profiles for L/ES workforce or when creating professional development opportunities.

### Competencies

Competencies were found to include:

- the knowledge and application of adult learning principles
- an understanding of the adult learner and how to create and maintain an inclusive learning environment
- general teaching methods and strategies; specific content knowledge, including the development of essential skills in that area
- developing activities, a learning framework and individualized learning/training plans
- facilitation skills
- assessment and evaluation

A basic level of competency is needed in all of these areas to begin work as an L/ES educator but professional development is the key to improving skills and knowledge. Like all adult educators, L/ES educators require an extensive knowledge of teaching adults and subject matter expertise. However, they must also understand and support students' ability to learn. Only the right approach, attitude and behaviour, mindset (tangible/intangible) and behaviours (savoir, savoir-faire, and savoir-être) can make this happen. The relationship between L/ES educators and their students is a key component of successful learning. How competencies are measured was outside the scope of the *Snapshot* but it is an area that should be addressed if there is to be consistency within the provinces and territories and throughout Canada. Some research suggests that a national framework would help to pull together the work being done by L/ES educators in Canada.

The key informants interviewed for the *Snapshot* were recommended by pivotal individuals in the L/ES field in provinces and territories across Canada. Therefore, it is likely that the key informants who were selected have already made a mark at the provincial or territorial level and have already demonstrated key competencies. Many others in the field are not well known outside their own programs. Further study is necessary if we are to understand the competencies of the full range of educators working in the L/ES

field. Overwhelming evidence shows the self-knowledge and reflective practices of the L/ES educators who were interviewed.

For the purpose of the *Snapshot*, skills were divided into five categories: setting up programs, working with learners, working with groups, and teaching. Competencies in the form of characteristics were identified separately. No single qualification led to entry to the L/ES workforce. However, qualifications for most key informants included undergraduate degrees and some had masters' degrees. Several key informants believed that L/ES educators should have a B.Ed. However, not all the key informants considered this to be necessary. Everyone agreed that it was important to complete courses in adult education. This was the single most common qualification and the one that most L/ES key informants considered to be crucial.

Other work experience was seen as a useful requirement for understanding workplace culture. Varied life experience is valuable when supporting learners. Although none of the key informants identified any external force exerting pressure on them to improve practice they were all striving for excellence. Critical self-reflection was seen as incredibly important for growth and continued improvement of practice. Improvements in practice evolve from identifying the learners' needs and the best practice to meet those needs. The over-arching finding from the *Snapshot* is that L/ES educators have their own set of competencies. It would be difficult to identify the province or territory of individual key informants because there was so much similarity in the responses from across Canada. The single thing that separated the responses was the fact that they are working with specific provincial and territorial levels of attainment for their students.

Workplace L/ES educators made the point that it is better to come into their field with experience working in L/ES in colleges, school boards or the community. The requirements for workplace educators are broader. A workplace educator has to be able to complete organizational needs assessments, identify what needs to be done and create programs based on the gaps identified. They need to be able to work with the different needs of the key players – bosses, supervisors, labour and learners. They need to be able to meet with employees and draw them into their programs. Not all L/ES educators make a successful transition from the community to the workplace because of the lack of structure and the power shift from campus is hard for many. Employers know they are not experts in training and want to hire an expert.

A professional identity emerges from the sum of the key informant interviews. Admittedly, this is a small sample of key informants but the findings have been consistent and the larger CLLN *Labour Market Study* will provide more data. The *Snapshot* revealed that there is a sense of professional identity in the L/ES field which is currently being created on an individual by individual basis. How widespread that is among all L/ES educators will be revealed by the broader CLLN *Labour Market Study*. Missing from the current picture of L/ES educators is the opportunity for a collective sense of professional self. Many key informants remarked on their sense of isolation from others in the field. This makes it difficult for L/ES educators to speak collectively. It also makes it difficult for researchers to gather information that will lead to the development of the field and facilitate delivery of effective L/ES programming.

Anne McKeown and Jay Derrick (2011), question the need for specialist qualifications for workplace L/ES educators. Both authors believe that a specialist qualification would be very problematic, given the diversity and complexity of workplaces. However training on generic aspects of workplace teaching could be included in an LES qualification. They suggest that a well-organized apprenticeship model of training

that is connected to practice may well be highly effective and sustainable. This model would incorporate continued professional development (CPD) after a relatively short initial teaching qualification.

There has been a lot of talk about the best way for L/ES educators to acquire qualifications that will enable them to motivate and support participants' success and yet in my conversation with L/ES educators they identified that the mindsets (tangible/intangible) and behaviours (savoir, savoir-faire, and savoir-être) are also crucially important factors to participants' success. These competencies are not discussed as often. In fact, the USA report [Improving Adult Literacy Instruction](#), April 2012, does not mention the relationship of participants to their educators even though the list is comprehensive in other aspects of quality programming.

*Remember that you can teach skills but you can't teach attitudes – you must get the right people in the first place.*

Key informant from *Snapshot*

### **Role of educators in the L/ES workforce**

Key informants were very clear that duties and responsibilities were both extremely important and this information is captured in the occupational task profiles. Moreover, L/ES participants are most often drawn from a population that is vulnerable and has had many challenges with education in the past and consequently they come with a lot of baggage. Key informants identified that they need skills and knowledge to meet responsibilities to participants, but they also need a set of characteristics that enable them to work effectively with participants.

*Knowledge about affective behaviour – our society does not dwell on emotions and most teaching blunders are caused because educators are scared to discuss issues or they feel they need to be in control. This can cause more blunders than anything taught as subject matter.*

Key informant from *Snapshot*

The key informants identified educators' personal characteristics as much more important in the literacy and essential skills arena than in other teaching or training environments. Many factors affect learning for participants, such as addictions, abuse or learning disabilities. L/ES educators should be knowledgeable about these factors when creating a learning environment. L/ES educators also need to have the personal characteristics to deal with these factors in a sensitive manner. Much of the work involves improving not only the skills of the participants but also their human development and potential, at work, at home or in the community. A social practice view of education was seen by most key informants to be important. Often L/ES educators are grounded by real life experiences in other fields.

Data from the American research study, *Understanding the Experience of Adult Learners: Content Analysis of Focus Group* focuses on the competencies of L/ES educators from the perspective of learners and how those learners view the value of their relationship with their educators. It examined the experiences of adult learners in adult education centres in the United States. The researchers were interested in knowing why learners attend programs, what program elements foster success, barriers to

learner participation and success and possible program improvements. The research showed that learners have aspirations but often have fragile self-confidence and have had their education disrupted by life events. Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs can help learners reinforce their tenacity and ability to overcome obstacles with passionate, inspiring teachers, friendships and support networks. Student-teacher relationships are particularly crucial. Analysis of the focus group information shows the importance of student-teacher relationship and the impact that committed L/ES staff have on the learning that happens in their programs.

While the focus of the data in the USA study was collected from education centres in the USA, it is interesting to note that all key informants, both in the workplace and the community, interviewed for the *Pan-Canadian Snapshot* agreed that the mindsets and behaviours of educators are crucial to the success of participants.

Interviewees in the *Snapshot* talked about the importance of attributes that cannot be taught. They mentioned the importance of attitude and the need for educators in L/ES to have humanity, self-awareness, empathy and tolerance. Without these attributes it is unlikely the person would be an effective L/ES educator, either in the community or the workplace.

*Not everyone gets it; some people will always be mechanical teachers and they don't have a place in L/ES programs. Classes shrink if L/ES educators don't have the pastoral/social work skills to support participants' readiness to learn.*

Key informant from *Snapshot*

The following is a list of the significant characteristics identified by the key informants.

Patience with oneself and others	Empathy
Optimism	Tolerance
Discretion	Enabling (teaching others to find their own way)
Sense of humour	Creativity
Good judgement	Positive attitude
Friendliness/Warmth	Energy
Curiosity	Self-awareness and balance
Approachability	Risk-taking
Responsiveness	Introspection
Empowering others	Motivating others
Flexibility	Non-judgemental
Rapport building	Accommodating
Willingness to learn and grow	Interpersonal awareness (body language etc.)
Humility	Common sense
Persistence	



*It's important that when enthusiasm wanes, their relationship with instructors in the program keeps them going.*

Key informant from *Snapshot*

I think that one of the best ways to ensure that L/ES educators have these competencies is to make sure that the selection process addresses the need for the mindsets and behaviours listed above. Behavioural questions should be asked in the hiring interview in order to ascertain the attitudes and competencies as they relate to savoir être. These attitudes and competencies should be further developed and explored in continuing professional development (CPD) once educators have been hired. I strongly believe emphasis should be placed on promoting best practices in the hiring process as well as considering the best way to deal with savoir être in CPD.

## **Mentoring**

Key informants all had experience of mentoring, often both as a mentor and mentee. They felt that it was important for L/ES educators to be mentored, especially those just starting out. They talked about the need to consider different ways to implement mentoring, either formally or informally. The idea of having a group of “master teachers” as mentors was discussed. Observations of experienced educators are an important component of mentorship, particularly for new instructors who often feel very isolated. Everyone found the mentoring process to be one that worked well. Mentoring could relate to all duties or to specific duties such as the first organizational needs assessment, the first initial placement assessment or the first “crucial conversation”. Key informants mentioned that mentors could be recruited from other fields, for example L/ES educators may want to consider the value of a mentoring relationship with emerging community leaders.

*My mentor was the first client I had in business. He taught me about the integrity of business.*

Key informant from *Snapshot*

Tensions sometimes exist when new educators hear talk about the loss of skills when experienced educators are retiring in large numbers. It is possible that new educators feel their skills are not recognized. Does a mentoring system help to alleviate some of these concerns?

As stated by Jay Derrick in the think paper cited earlier, “Most teachers learn most of their professional expertise once they have started teaching, not before.” This sentiment was echoed by key informants in the *Snapshot*. This implies that new educators do need the benefit of mentors, reflective practices and research in practice to hone their skills, even though, in the beginning they may feel knowledgeable and ready for the challenge of teaching Literacy and Essential Skills.

## Observations

While observations can be difficult to arrange, most key informants in the *Snapshot* mentioned their importance in preparing new staff for their role and for improving techniques. There was some debate about whether or not the person observed should be a “master teacher”. Observations could take place independently or as part of a broader program of CPD.

## Questions to Consider

- How important do you think savoir être is when dealing with people who have had difficulties learning in the past?
- How can we ensure that mindsets, attitudes and behaviours don't get lost in a system that values qualifications?
- How can we work together to promote a hiring process that promotes recognition of mindsets and behaviours as well as qualifications and experience?
- How do we know if someone will be successful in making the transition from programs in the community to workplace delivery?
- Do we need to create a collective sense of professional self for workplace L/ES educators? If so, how?
- How can we work together to facilitate professional development?
- Is there a place for master teachers and mentors in professional development?
- Can we blend mentoring and professional development so that skills of experienced educators are not lost while maintaining a belief in the skills that new educators are acquiring and developing?
- What else should we look at in terms of competencies?
- Are we ready to begin the development of a NOC code for L/ES educators?

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