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WorldLit

Newsletter of World Literacy of Canada

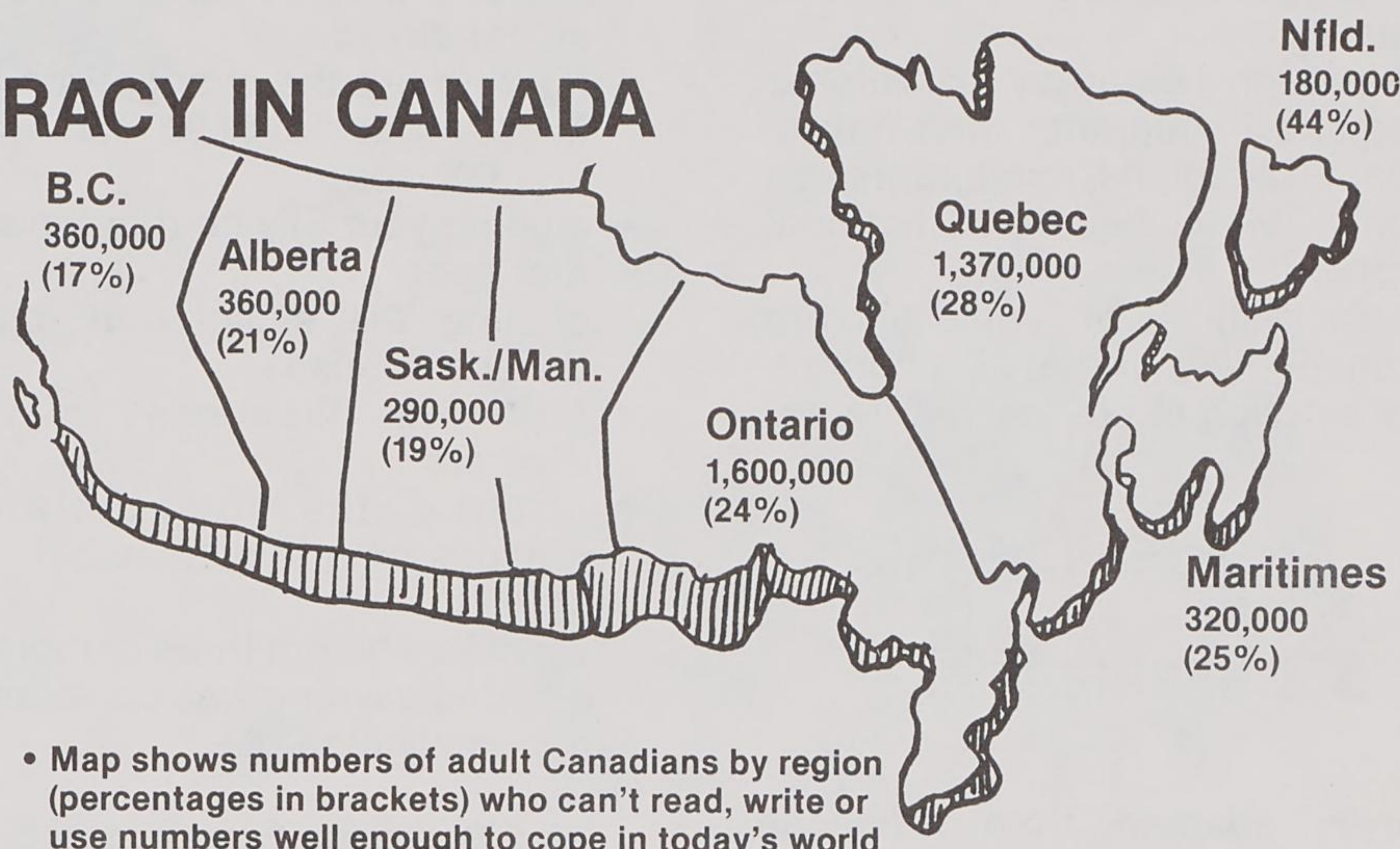
Issue Number 78

Fall 1987

SOUTHAM REPORT SHOCKS CANADIANS

SPECIAL REPORT - LITERACY IN CANADA

In 1976, when WLC published Audrey Thomas' study, **Adult Basic Education and Literacy Activities in Canada**, Canadians were shocked to discover that 1 in 4 Canadian adults was "functionally illiterate". This study was based on the government's statistical definition of literacy - a grade nine education. However, Thomas recognized that this was not a very accurate assessment of the skills required to function effectively in a print-oriented society.



Source: The Creative Research Group and the Ottawa Citizen

In September 87, Southam News released the results of a new nation-wide literacy survey. The techniques used to identify and measure literacy levels were new and linked to everyday tasks, but the results were no better. **Five million Canadian adults - 24% - scored as functionally illiterate in the Southam Literacy Survey.** Most surprising, the Survey showed that one-third of this number were high-school graduates. These people had never been counted in previous estimates of illiteracy levels because they had completed grade 9 or more.

Highlights of the Southam Literacy Survey results include:

- 8% or the adult population over 15 is basically illiterate.
- An additional 16% is functionally illiterate and 9% more are only marginally literate.
- The incidence of illiteracy increases from west to east, with the highest levels in Quebec and Newfoundland.

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY

"No one knows the anger that people who can't read go through. You can't pick up a paper and learn the latest news. You can't carry on a conversation because you don't know what's going on in the world. You're left in the dark. You just try to carry on the best you can. We're living in a different world than other people who can read."

Ron, literacy learner, Ottawa

Twenty years ago the United Nations declared the 8th of September to be International Literacy Day. Each year this special day provides the occasion for organizations, like ours, to call the attention of national leaders, educators and the general public to the scale of the struggle against illiteracy and the issues at stake.

World Literacy of Canada celebrated this special day with an exciting evening at Toronto's renowned cultural oasis, HARBOURFRONT. Thanks to the co-operation of Ohlmeyer Communications, the ABC Television Network and Harbourfront's FREE FORUM series, we were proud to present the world premiere of the film **BLUFFING IT** which stars Dennis Weaver as a functionally illiterate adult struggling to hide his inability to read and write. The premiere was followed by an informative panel discussion which included comments from Nigel Martin of the Canadian Organization for Solidarity and Development, Linda Frampton, a learner-facilitator, and David Silcox, the Deputy Minister for the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, Ontario. WLC was pleased to receive partial funding for the evening from the Ministry.

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- People who are illiterate earn only $\frac{2}{3}$ the income of literate adults and are twice as likely to be long-term unemployed.
- One out of 6 working Canadians is illiterate.
- Illiteracy is higher among francophones (29%) than anglophones (23%).
- Illiteracy is higher among men (53.5%) than women (46.5%). It is also higher among Canadians over 55 than among young people.
- Canadians aged 21 to 25 performed at a slightly lower level than Americans of the same age who participated in a similar survey.
- Although illiteracy is higher among immigrants than native-born Canadians, immigrants add only 2% to the overall national total.
- Less than 2% of people who are functionally illiterate are currently enrolled in literacy programs.



Survey adapted from American model

The survey was conducted for Southam News by The Creative Research Group of Toronto. It was based on interviews in English or French with 2,398 adults in 148 Canadian communities and rural areas. Three samples were taken: a random cross-section of the whole population, extra samples for some cities and regions, and a special sample of 21 - 25 year olds.

In addition to answering questions about their background and activities, participants in the survey were asked to complete a test of reading, writing and numbers skills based on 61 items drawn from real-life situations. These literacy items were adapted from a 1985 U.S. survey of the National Assessment of Educational Progress by substituting Canadian spellings, materials and topical references. Two specially printed newspapers in English and French were used to test literacy in reading newspaper articles.

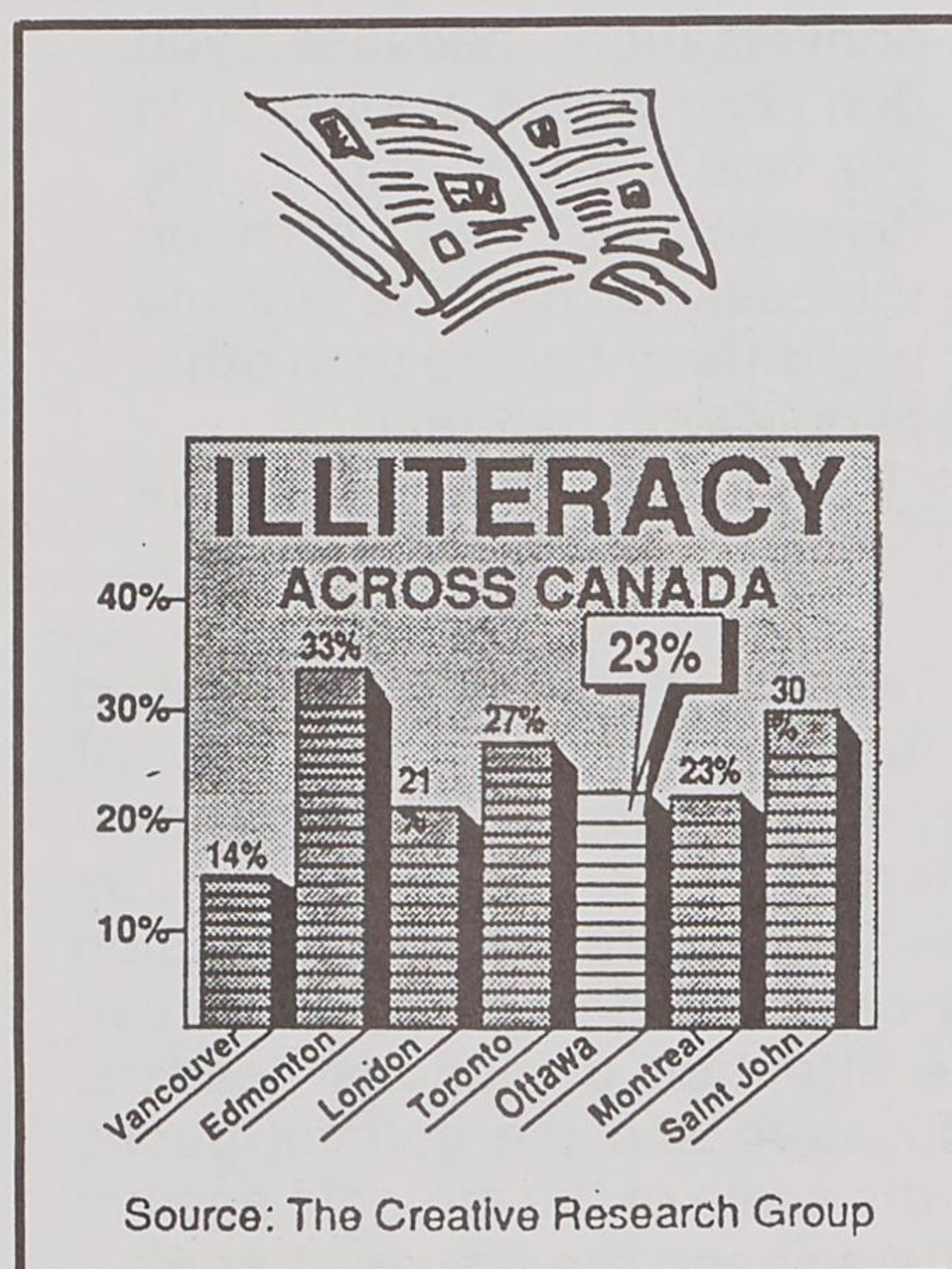
What is literacy?

The Southam Survey took the approach that an arbitrary grade level was not an accurate measure of the skills needed to meet the literacy demands of today's society. Instead, they asked a panel of 25 Canadians - from authors to businessmen to literacy students and workers - to come up with 10 things thought essential for Canadians. The list included:

- reading and understanding the dosage from a bottle of cough syrup
- from six road signs, picking out the one that warns of a traffic signal ahead
- figuring out the change from \$3 if you order a \$1.95 sandwich and 60¢ soup
- signing your SIN card in the correct spot
- circling the expiry date on a driver's license
- following directions from a diagram
- circling the long-distance charges on a telephone bill

Anyone who got three or more of the 10 items wrong was considered functionally illiterate.

The Southam Survey has been criticized for being biased towards middle class values and not relevant to all areas of Canada or all language groups but the information presented in the Survey will be an important resource in the process of defining a national policy and national priorities for literacy.



Illiteracy - the problem that isn't going away

While it is true that functional illiteracy is highest among adults over 55, the alarmingly high rates for young people including high-school graduates demonstrates that illiteracy is not going to disappear by itself. Government statistics which record only the grade level completed give the impression that more and more Canadians are becoming better educated, when in fact the research indicates that there is a net increase of approximately 30,000 illiterate adults each year.

- Among those aged 21 - 25, illiteracy was nearly 6 times higher for school dropouts (40%) than for those who graduated (7%).
- 30% of Canadian high school students drop out each year. This is more than double the national U.S. average. Students cite boredom, lack of interest, problems with the school system or wanting to work as their prime reasons for dropping out.
- Between 1971 and 1981, technological change cut employment for workers with less than grade 9 education by 15% and by 8% for high school dropouts.

Reading expert Frank Smith claims that schools kill children's interest in reading and writing by separating these activities from real-life situations. Other studies indicate that the schools systematically discriminate against children from poor and immigrant families by streaming them into dead end courses. As part of a co-ordinated national strategy for literacy, provincial Ministers of Education must seriously assess and revise the public education system which is currently helping to create a new generation of illiterate adults.

World Literacy of Canada Projects



Mothers with pre-school children at a training session in Sri Lanka.

The Women's Forum, of the National Association for Total Education (NATE) in Sri Lanka, carried out an action research entitled "Non-Formal Education for Working Mothers of Low Income Groups with Pre-School Children." The project involved 400 highly impoverished mothers in underdeveloped pockets in ten electorates in Sri Lanka.

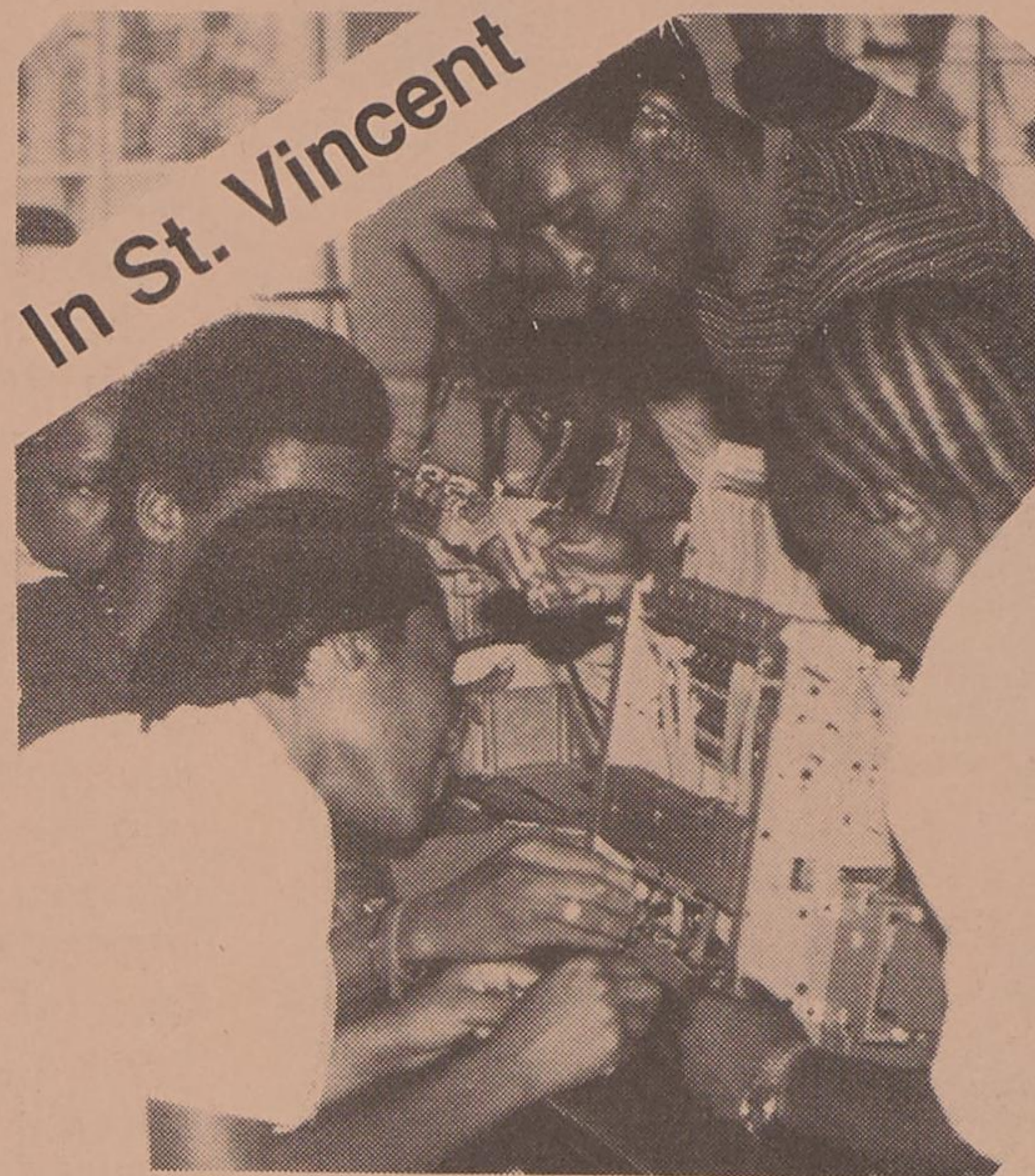
Dr. Jaya Gajanayahe, project co-ordinator of NATE, reports that the "training of trainers" programme and the training sessions for the mothers were a great success. The mothers were taught how to bring up pre-school children and how to organize income generating activities. With the help of your contribution, the work in Sri Lanka continues.

The St. Vincent's Union of Teachers' literacy project is into its third successful year thanks to your continuing support of WLC. Approximately 2,000 learners have benefited from the S.V.U.T. program to date. Innovative steps are being taken to create income generating programs in an effort to make the project self-sufficient.

Oswin Curling, a WLC Board member, recently returned from St. Vincent where he conducted a technical training workshop on the use and maintenance of office equipment.

Thanks to the eagerness and enthusiasm displayed by the students, Oswin reports that the workshop was a tremendous success and sees great potential for the application of these new skills to benefit the S.V.U.T. literacy project specifically, and the entire island of St. Vincent in general.

Keep an eye on future newsletters to see how the 'seed' of a good idea 'takes root' and 'blossoms'. Keep on planting, Oswin!



Students and literacy workers learning the mechanics of office machines in St. Vincent.

'Democratization' as its theme, the African Association for Literacy and Adult Education (AALAE) held its first General Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya in July '87. WLC President, Ruth Baldwin, participated in this historic meeting.

Formed in 1984, with a diverse membership in 29 African countries, AALAE has established seven program networks that will focus on: literacy, women & development, environmental education, participatory research, artists for development, training of trainers, and university adult and continuing education.

To continue this important process of 'democratization', WLC will be working closely with AALAE over the next few years to support their literacy and development programs. Through our newsletters, we will keep you up-to-date on our partner organizations and the progress of their work.



WLC President, Ruth Baldwin, discusses literacy program with Joseph Magala of Uganda, at AALAE General Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya.

In Canada



Mike Browne, co-ordinator of the St. Vincent literacy project, at a pre-school in Nanaimo, B.C.

New Women's Kit

The Women's Kit is a set of booklets produced for use by women in English as a Second Language classes, literacy groups and other women's groups. It is intended to help women to get together to think and talk about their lives. The booklets are made up of excerpts from material about women's lives from the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and England.

The kit is published jointly by the Participatory Research Group (PRG) and the International Council for Adult Education, Women's Program. Call or write PRG to order your kit: 229 College St., Suite 309, Toronto, Ont., M5T 1R4, (416) 977-8118.



'Women Working for Change'

This was the theme of a workshop on popular education which World Literacy held recently in Ottawa. Fifteen women from the Philippines, Chile, Mali and Canada met to compare their experience with popular education in the areas of literacy, health care, food production, human rights, women's rights and new technology. Thanks to Teresa Marshall, Rokiatu Tall, and Carol Anonuevo of the I.C.A.E. Women's Network for sharing their experiences with us.

New Publication

"Our Land, Our Cities, Our Future", published by the Saskatchewan Council for International Cooperation, is an easy-reading resource booklet on global environment and development issues. People interested in both environmental and Third World issues are encouraged to order copies from the SCIC: Huston House, 2138 McIntyre St., Regina, Saskatchewan, S4P 2R7, (306) 757-4669.

Commonwealth Connections

In March, 1987, James A. Draper, Board member of WLC, represented WLC at the funding conference of the Commonwealth Association for the Education and Training of Adults. The event took place in a semi-rural area of India and was attended by over 80 persons from 31 countries of the Commonwealth. This seven day event focused on the theme of "Educating Adults in the Commonwealth: Resources and Needs". Working through smaller groups, each participant was able to visit Indian villages in order to understand some of the problems and issues, but also some of the successes, related to the education of men and women in the Commonwealth countries, with special reference to vocational training.

This newly formed Adult Education Association, with its present headquarters in London, is intended to support the work of Adult Education practitioners in developing countries of the Commonwealth and to increase the sharing of experiences between those

involved in and committed to development, training and adult education. As a professional Association, most of its members are grass roots workers engaged in providing and teaching courses to adults in such programs as health care, income generation, rural development and agriculture, women's education, industrial training and continuing education programs. The Association, through its newsletter and by other means, is intended to bring together adult educators who share similar interests. The purpose of the Association relates directly to the work that WLC has been involved in for over 35 years.

The Association is divided into five regions, accounting for all of the 49 country-members of the Commonwealth. Canada and the Caribbean make up "The Americas Region". The first regional workshop of the Association will be held in the Caribbean in May, 1988.

For further information about the Association and the Caribbean Conference, please contact James A. Draper, Department of Adult Education, OISE, 252 Bloor St. West, Toronto, Ont., M5S 1V6.

Congratulations!

Former WLC Board member, Alan M. Clarke, has been nominated for the Norman High Award for his exceptional contribution to Adult Education in Ontario. While Alan was on the WLC board, he was chairman of the "Canada Project" which was the forerunner to the Movement for Canadian Literacy. Alan is presently Information Advisor to the International Joint Commission in Ottawa.

Fundraiser

World Literacy of Canada is pleased to announce that Louise Meret-Hanke has been hired as a full time Fundraiser. Louise previously worked as a fundraiser for Goodwill Industries of Toronto. WLC is looking for innovative ways to raise more money for literacy and development projects around the world. Louise welcomes your ideas.



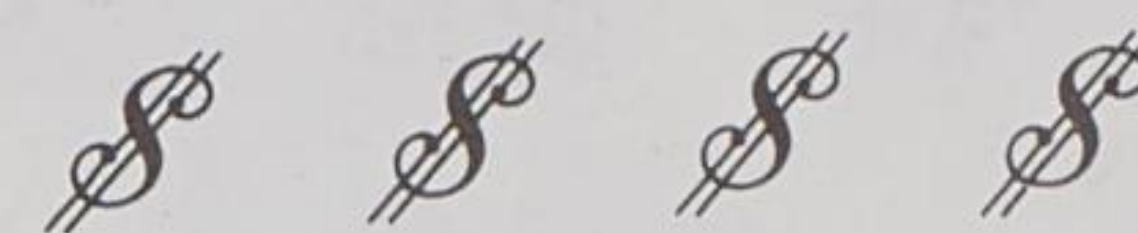
Are We Really Importing Illiteracy?

The Southam News Inc. survey of literacy in Canada found that "The three-million-plus immigrants now living in Canada barely nudge the national illiteracy levels upwards, from 22% for native-born residents by themselves to 24% overall" (Peter Calamai, "Literacy Crusade Urged for Immigrants", Toronto Star, Sept. 14, '87). The survey further shows that the grown up children of immigrants did considerably better on the literacy test than did long-established Canadians. In spite of these findings, Calamai managed to slant the article so that it appears that immigrants can be made the scapegoats in national "blame laying" regarding illiteracy. For example, he quotes Conservative MP Jim Hawkins, chair of a House Committee on labour, employment and immigration, as saying, "We're importing a big chunk of illiteracy" and "People who sign with their thumbprints come to Canada automatically as relatives but people with engineering degrees are being denied".

Before laying the blame for Canada's alarming illiteracy findings on immigrants, it is critical that the results of the Southam survey be re-analyzed, and that further research be conducted and reported in a high profile way. The problem with the Southam survey, or at least Calamai's reporting of it, is that no distinction is made between problems of literacy and problems of English language learning. It is clear from reports in the Toronto Star that the survey did not assess how well the respondents spoke English, although an account of their language background was made. Thus failures on the test are reported as literacy failures and not failures to handle literacy tasks in English. Calamai compounded this confusing and damaging picture in a second article, "Problems plague literacy class". This article left the impression that English as a second language classes are literacy classes, that they are a major drain on the public purse, and that they are highly ineffective.

We must come to terms in measured and realistic ways, with concerns that a growing number of immigrants (largely family class and refugees) came to Canada with low levels of formal education and literacy skills, and that regular English as a second language classes usually fail to help immigrants who are illiterate in their own language. As Calamai says, more provisions for English as a second language training are needed. English as a second language programs specifically aimed at newcomers with low levels of mother tongue literacy have only emerged in the past decade and need a great deal of support. The majority of immigrants who have adequately developed literacy skills in their mother tongue, learn oral and written English quickly and well. However, they may have residual linguistic and cultural difficulties of the sorts that may have caused some of them to make mistakes on the Southam literacy test, even though they had strategies for handling such situations in real life.

We need more and better English as a second language programs for all immigrants who do not speak an official Canadian language, in order for them to fulfill their potential. We need special programs for immigrants with low levels of mother tongue literacy. What we do not need is more confusion about English language learning and literacy which can further add fuel to the 'immigrant bashers' fires.



Who funds literacy?

Although education is a provincial responsibility in Canada, who should fund adult literacy has never been clearly defined. The federal government has been cutting its commitment to basic education and upgrading programs throughout the last ten years. Some provinces have adopted policies to provide for basic education, but, in general, funding for adult literacy has fallen between the cracks of federal and provincial responsibility. For the majority of literacy programs, especially those run by community organizations, there has been little funding available.

In spite of a succession of government reports calling for action on illiteracy there has been no federal commitment. Secretary of State, David Crombie, conceded that he's struggling to get some sort of permanent federal commitment to literacy in place before the existing public interest falls off. The \$1 million in 'development' funds that was announced on September 8 does not provide any assurance to local literacy programs of either stable or long-term funding.

We congratulate Canada for sponsoring the 'Right to Learn' declaration at UNESCO's international conference on Adult Education in 1985, and Canada's active participation in promoting the declaration of 1990 as International Literacy Year. However, it is time now for Canada to both politically and financially commit itself to literacy programs nationally and internationally.



Students, volunteers and literacy workers participating in International Literacy Day in Toronto.

WLC also participated in the International Literacy Day Picnic and Fair which was held September 12 in Toronto. Literacy groups held court at one end of the recreation centre, setting up displays and distributing literature, while the other end witnessed a festive parade of musicians, mime artists, talks on literacy and a cornucopia of food and drink. The picnic was a particular success because the focus of the day was on the learners themselves: they performed skits and spoke from their perspective of the frustrations of being illiterate in a literate world.

International Literacy Day '87 was a success. Together we can make '88 an even bigger success.



National Ad Campaign Calls for Action on Illiteracy

World Literacy of Canada is 1 of 8 national organizations that have been working together, under the leadership of the Movement for Canadian Literacy, to influence federal and provincial policies on literacy. On October 23, 1987, the national edition of the Toronto Globe & Mail carried a full-page, open letter from this group to the Prime Minister, Premiers and Territorial Leaders. The letter, which outlined a 10 point plan of action, challenged our leaders to make literacy a priority in Canada.

More than 150 individuals and organizations from across the country supported this challenge. If you would like to add your name to the list, contact: The Movement for Canadian Literacy, P.O. Box 6366, Station A, Saint John, New Brunswick, E2L 4R8.

become a partner with WLC



Become a partner today, contact



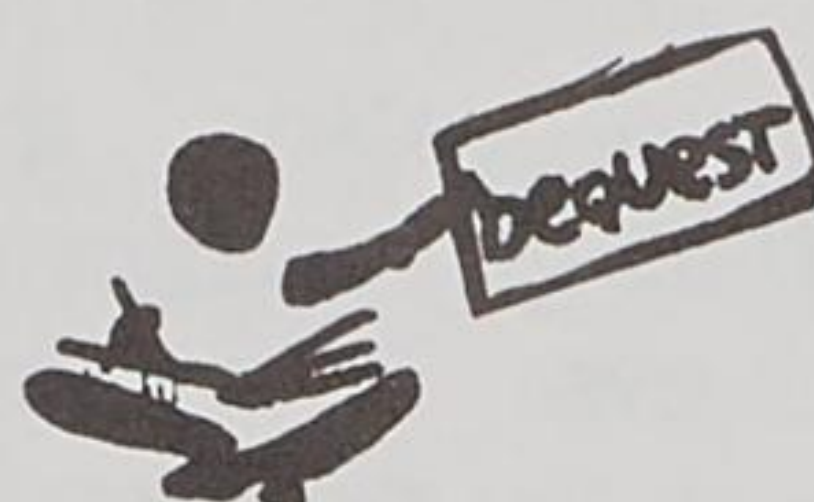
Every dollar donated to WLC's literacy and development projects is matched 3 to 1 by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).



Volunteers are always needed. Supporters are encouraged to promote the work of WLC in their community.



Send us your innovative ideas for raising money and promoting the cause of literacy and development.



Your legacy, bequest or gift of life insurance will help us respond to the urgent need for more literacy programs.



World Literacy of Canada
692 Coxwell Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
M4C 3B6
(416) 465-4667

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Editor: Mamta Mishra

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