

Poverty

Literacy issues are often a symptom of social inequality created by poverty; it is not merely a product of undereducation.

Low literacy, poverty and exclusion are all part of the same problem. Marginalized cultural, racial and economic groups have low literacy as a direct result of having fewer choices in jobs, education, housing and other areas of advancement.

Children from low-income households are at risk of low literacy; poverty and low literacy form a cycle that is very difficult to break. When parents are not equipped to actively engage with the school system, high drop out rates among their children.

Low literacy contributes to inequalities in income, occupational status and reduced access to labour markets. Adults with strong literacy skills enjoy many positive benefits: they maintain salaries of up to 33% higher than those of low literacy and are twice as likely to be employed. They are also far more likely to obtain more secure and attractive positions of employment.

Literacy is a defining characteristic of social class and an instrument of social power. People become part of a culture by learning to interpret and use its particular signs and symbols. Language facilitates social and economic relations, making literacy skills vital to the realization of one's full potential. Strong literacy skills allow access to opportunities in society and the dominant social groups.

What can be done? Policies must address literacy in the context of poverty in order to be truly effective. The systematic inequalities that exist in Canadian society will not simply be overcome with improved literacy programs.

- Literacy must be understood as more than just reading and writing. Literacy skills are tools for participation.
- It is crucial for adults with low literacy to make use of available literacy and job training programs as these present the means to overcome the problems that arise from low literacy.
- Encourage the natural development of literacy by allowing individuals full participation in their society.
- Encourage equity by making social programs easily available and accessible to those living in poverty.

A commitment must be made to the underlying pursuit of social and economic justice for a more literate citizenry.