LACMF
LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUMEDIA FOCUS

The politics of literacy policy

The Speech from the Throne in January 2001 has given Canadians hope that we may finally see an adult literacy policy that meets the needs of our complicated country. As organizations and groups across Canada participate in federal consultations, and attempt to build common ground, we have the benefit of learning from other industrialized nations that are at various stages of national policy creation.

The British have set the pace internationally. Launching "Skills for Life," their national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills, the Labour government has created a cabinet Committee and named a Minister for Lifelong Learning with specific responsibility for basic skills. They have also created a new Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to oversee implementation. Building on recommendations from a 1999 blue-ribbon commission headed by Sir Claus Moser, (see p.10), the government has addressed every aspect of adult basic skills provision and services, supported over extended time with unprecedented funding allocations. They propose to spend £241 million in 2000-01. £313 million in 2001-02; £366 million in 2002-03 and £403 million in 2003-04. Included in the strategy are provisions for a national campaign and outreach, learning opportunities in many sites, ICT and mixed media delivery, priority target groups, core curriculum, teacher recruitment and training, quality control, research and monitoring, They have given equal weight to literacy and numeracy and emphasized ICT skills, calling the initiative read•write•plus.

Overall, they have positioned basic skills as part of lifelong learning for adults, a concept much talked about but not widely practiced, and are coordinating the strategy with other policies addressing social inclusion for the neediest segments of their society.

The first 750,000 people targeted by 2004 include various set numbers from the following groups: jobseekers, other benefit claimants, prisoners and parolees, public sector employees, adults in low-skilled jobs, young people, general basic skills learners (including those on learndirect), refugees and speakers of other languages, parents, and people who live in disadvantaged communities.

Before implementing the strategy, the government engaged in a lengthy consultation

process with key stakeholders, building support and consensus. In one of the final consultations in January 2001 the DfEE brought together ten foreigners to offer some outside perspectives before the final draft of the policy was completed and to share some models of good practice from their countries in pedagogy, teacher training, materials development, and use of ICT that could be adapted to the UK. Invitees came from Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Belgium. I was privileged to be among them.

In trying to crystallize some Canadian strengths to share at the table, I focused on the diversity and richness of practice and materials development that reflect the regional, cultural and linguistics differences. I also noted the beginnings of communication and resource infrastructure, the growth in expertise and knowledge, and the strong partnership models that have been fostered. I took them on an electronic tour of some outstanding Canadian models. But it was impossible to avoid saying that we do not yet have a national policy and that our political structure with its jurisdictional divisions, and our history of regional loyalties complicates attempts to develop one. (A summary of my comments is available on The Centre's web site.)

In the coming months, I will describe the policies in some of these countries, and track progress both in the newsletter and on our web site. Considering differences as well as similarities between ourselves and other countries enlarges our thinking in this period of possibility.

This issue of *LACMF* begins by describing the evolution and some key features of the British strategy. Because the initiative is so recent, it is too early to comment on outcomes. I do note some of the challenges.

This issue also looks at some recent Canadian contributions to current policy discussions closer to home and shows how policy can have impact on curriculum and professional development, using the example of outcomes – based Demonstrations On-Line in Ontario. It highlights the new and contradictory interest in literacy of Canadian government communicators. The remaining articles and reviews examine the impact of race, class and culture on literacy, and a range of participatory adult education practices. Excerpts from an international conference on Women and Literacy and a full insert on literacy and homelessness illustrate the complex inter-play among literacy, personal development, and other social, economic and political factors.

[LS]