

Literacy in Canada's North

We spoke with Helen Balanoff, Executive Director of the NWT Literacy Council, and Beth Mulloy, Executive Director of the Yukon Literacy Coalition, about literacy and learning in Canada's North.

Helen Balanoff & Beth Mulloy



Photo credit: Helen Balanoff.

Northern Public Affairs: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Literacy forms the basis of healthy communities and strong democratic politics. Can you tell us about the state of literacy in Yukon and the Northwest?

Helen Balanoff: Formal assessments like the recent Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) or the Alberta Achievement Tests (AAT) don't paint a pretty picture of English literacy and math skills in the NWT. However, these are snapshots in time and are only one way of measuring skill development. We have to be a little bit cautious when we use them, because they tell only a part of the story.

What we do know is that we have children and youth who don't work at grade level in English and we still have high numbers of young people who drop out of school before they reach Grade 12.

This means we have a significant number of young people who don't have the skills they need to be able to get and keep jobs. People with lower levels of literacy are more likely to be unemployed and on income support, or have low paying jobs. They are more likely to have poor health, and parents' levels of education impact children's levels of literacy. We know that this is particularly an issue among the Aboriginal population. Having said that, we can't lose sight of the skills that people have: their relationship with the land, their culture and language, their stories. The health of Aboriginal languages is declining, however, so there's some urgency to dealing with language revitalization and retention.

Beth Mulloy: In Yukon, the recent results show that we hold the highest level of literacy and skills in Canada. What that means is still being analyzed. The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (2003) results showed much the same. We concluded

From left to right: Helen Balanoff, Emily Kudlak from Ulukhaktok, and Cynthia Chambers from the University of Lethbridge. Photo taken at the British Museum in London as part of our Ulukhaktok Literacies Research Project.

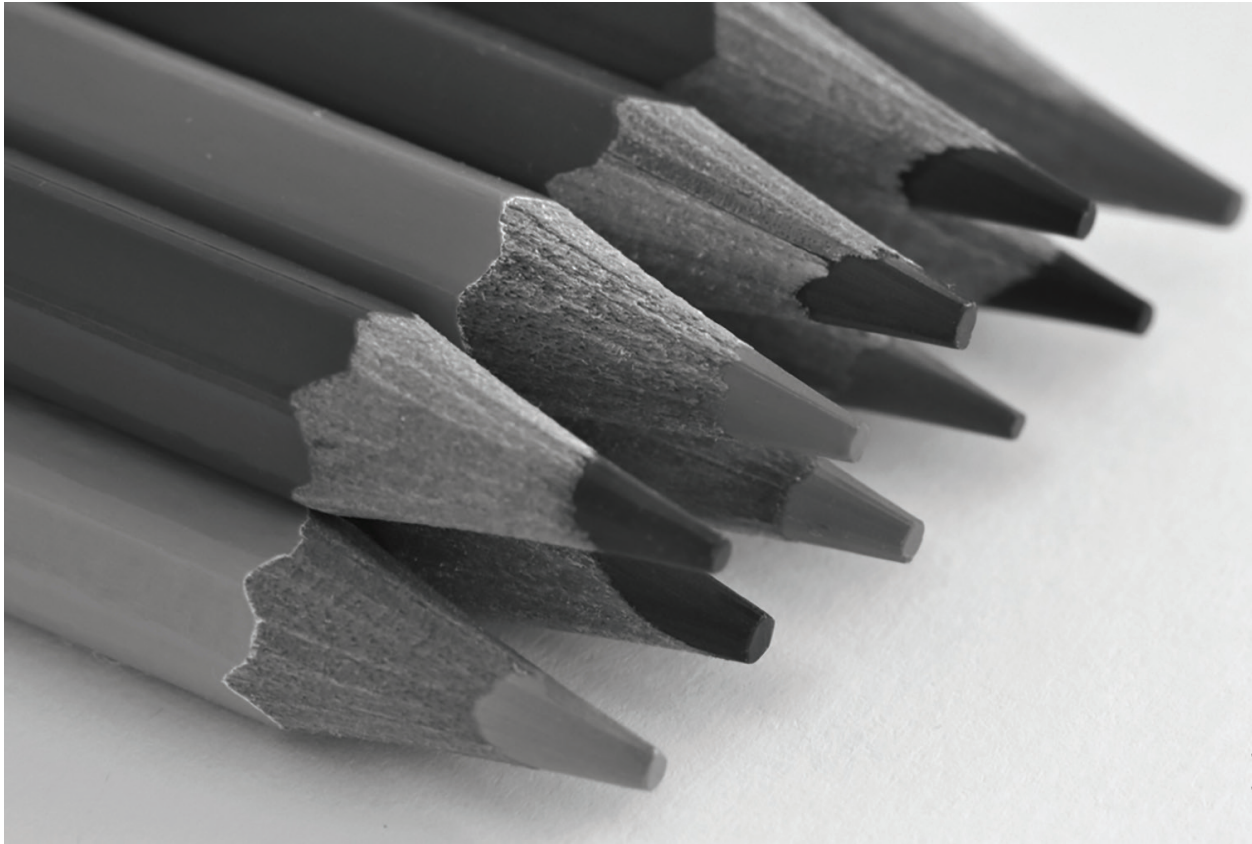


Photo credit: Martijn Nijhuis

that the highly educated Whitehorse population influenced these results. Rural and First Nations populations had lower scores, which were much more in line with the other territories. We anticipate that the PIAAC results will translate much the same way.

The three territories have the highest percentage of First Nations people per capita in Canada. This population also appears to have the highest need for support in literacy and other essential skills. We also know that there is a relatively high percentage of children who not ready for kindergarten. This is an area of great concern to the Yukon Literacy Coalition (YLC), and we are supported by the Yukon government to provide programs for families and children to support literacy.

How does literacy skill development work in dual or multi-language communities?

Balanoff: I think one of the issues in literacy development in the NWT is that we don't pay enough attention to the fact that we *do* work in a multi-lingual, multicultural, multiple literacies context. And by 'we' I mean most people who work in the field of literacy. Literacy is a social, cultural construct. It's grounded in the culture and society where it takes place. In a multicultural context, that makes it very complex. People need English literacy skills today,

but they still also need to be able to make meaning in their own culture — and for a lot of people in the NWT, that's an Indigenous culture.

English literacy is based on an alphabetic, written model, but Indigenous forms of literacy are not. They're often more symbolic and based on oral language and non-alphabetic literacy. Elders, for example, have amazing memories and are able to recall the most minute details about events, such as who was there, where it was, what time of year it was, and so on. They can 'read' the weather; they can tell where they are by 'reading' the land; they understand their kinship relationships and explain them in a way that someone grounded in English literacy finds hard to understand. For example, in Inuit culture you might find an older girl addressing a young girl as 'big brother' because of her kinship relationship to the older girl through her namesake. That doesn't make sense in English literacy. So the types of literacy that people use at home are not necessarily the types of literacy that schools teach. I don't think we really know how to bridge the gap between family and community literacy and the forms of literacy involved in formal education, yet it's critical to be able to do that.

Mulloy: In Yukon, there are two official languages: French and English. There are also eight First Nations languages in the Yukon. However, the dominant language in the First Nations communities is English as there are fewer and fewer fluent

speakers of traditional languages. There are also many other communities of people from around the world living in the Yukon.

We work primarily in English while working closely with our French partners who are working on a project together to have more of our signage and resources in both English and French. We also work together on Family Literacy initiatives and we have a board member from the French community.

We don't get funding to work directly with Aboriginal languages and our experience in the Yukon is that most Aboriginal people speak English. The Yukon Native Language Centre works in Aboriginal language literacy. We have not yet been able to partner with them on a project or activity but hope to in the future. We work with communities with English literacy activities in traditional settings such as culture camps. When we are able, we incorporate Aboriginal languages into our work, but so far this work has been limited to translating the occasional resource. We offer some French and Spanish in the Family Literacy Centre. We hope to increase our work to include more of the languages in the Yukon and have developed a multi-language library project that we hope attracts the resources needed to make it happen.

What are the best resources to use to address literacy challenges in Yukon and the NWT? How should these resources be allocated?

Balanoff: I think if we knew the answer to that, we might have solved the problem a long time ago! I think there are several areas that need more focus. One of the areas that needs more attention is early childhood and family resources. We've talked about that for a long time here in the NWT, but we haven't made much progress. The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) is now putting some focus on this area, but it's been a long time coming. The research shows that putting supports for early childhood and parents in place particularly for children pre-natal to 3 years old has a positive impact on children's success. So I think that's an area where resources need to be focused.

A second area is youth literacy. Given our dropout rate, we need to pay attention to people who have left school early and often are hanging around the community. We have a large labour shortage (or 'skills mismatch') in this country, but we have a significant number of people who, with the right training, could be part of the labour force. We are beginning to see more resources put into this area and that's positive. Both the federal government and

the GNWT are funding youth literacy projects.

The third area is adult basic education. The federal government has put \$27 million into adult basic education through the three territorial colleges, but many people who need to upgrade their skills are not ready to go back into a formal learning environment. They need some transition programming that lets them experience success quickly, and then they're more likely to return to formal learning. So we need a greater focus on community-based and community-driven non-formal learning for those with the lowest levels of skills to re-engage them in learning.

Mulloy: There are a number of resources and best practices that are addressing literacy challenges in Yukon. At the YLC, we feel that community based and Northern developed resources have the greatest success. We have had great success with embedded literacy in culture camps and working one-on-one with families in casual learning environments. We have piloted innovative projects such as the Learning Circle held for several months at the Whitehorse Correctional Institute. I understand that one-on-one tutoring offered by Yukon Learn is also very successful and Yukon College provides many work preparation skills development courses that include a literacy component.

What considerations do local and territorial governments, policy makers, and practitioners need to be aware of when developing policy and programs for the Northern context?

Balanoff: They need to really pay attention to the needs of our NWT population. Governments, in particular, have a tendency to create programs that take a one-size fits all approach. The needs of our Northern population are different from the needs of people in the South. We need to look at what these needs are and try to figure out the best ways to address these needs.

For example, currently the Government of Canada is proposing a new Canada Job Grant that would replace the Labour Market Agreements (LMA) that Canada has with the provinces and territories. I'm not convinced that the Canada Job Grant necessarily suits small businesses, which is largely what we have here. I'm also not sure that employers will want to hire people with lower level skills and want to train them.

Second, the LMA has allowed the NWT to tailor training to people with lower levels of skills. Eliminating that funding will leave a significant portion of our population with fewer training opportuni-

ties. The IALSS in 2003 showed that in Canada we have a tendency to provide training to people with higher levels of skills. The LMA not only broadened the scope of training opportunities, but allowed the NWT to make decisions around the training that was needed to meet the needs of a specific segment of the population. As someone from Alaska said at the Centre for the North Summit in Whitehorse this past October, "Outside solutions don't work for the North."

Formal schooling in the NWT is still relatively new compared to other areas of Canada. We also have the legacy of residential schooling that still has an intergenerational impact. All of that needs to be considered, along with language and culture. The situation is particularly complex in the NWT with 11 official languages. I think we need to put much more emphasis on supporting Aboriginal languages.

Are there any innovative programs or approaches to literacy education in Yukon and the NWT that you would like to share with readers? If so, what are they and why are they innovative?

Balanoff: I think the NWT Literacy Council's family literacy programming has been innovative. We started it slowly just over 10 years ago with training. There are four components to the program: training for community facilitators, development of resources to support their programs, promoting the importance and benefits of family literacy, and providing outreach and support to the programs. Family literacy fits really well in the North in Indigenous communities where family is so important. We've trained people from every community in the NWT, and while they don't all run family literacy programs, they may, for example, have incorporated family literacy into their everyday family routines.

I think a great example of family literacy programming is in Deline, where Mary Ann Vital offers a broad range of programs in North Slavey, as well as in English. We also had a research project in Ulukhaktok on Indigenous literacy. We're still finishing that but I think it has shown us some of the things that we need to do to support that bridge from home and community-based literacy into more formal English literacy for school and work, and to help people retain their Indigenous literacies. The NWT Literacy Council is also recognized as a leader in literacy resource development. Last year (2012-2013), there were more than seven million downloads of our resource materials from the Copian website (the former National Adult Literacy Database). For a

small organization like ours, that's phenomenal, and we're very proud of that!

I also think we see some really transformative programs when they are culturally and community-based. The Dechinta Bush University has taken a unique and important step in culture-based programming. While it's a formal program connected to the University of Alberta, it uses community-based, non-formal approaches to learning, and it works. It contextualizes skill development, which makes learning more meaningful and ultimately leads to greater success for learners.

So I think we're seeing innovation. However, there's no magic bullet for literacy and skill development; it's a long-term initiative that needs resources and support on a long-term basis.

Mulloy: We developed a Learning Circle Pilot Project that was held in the Whitehorse Correctional Centre. It was designed to meet the needs of inmates, to help them develop essential skills necessary for life and work. Each participant designed their own program by picking the essential skill they wanted to develop and choosing a project that needed that skill. For instance, one participant chose to make a button blanket to work on his math skills.

Another very successful initiative has been the development of our Family Literacy programming. Working in partnership with the City of Whitehorse and the Government of Yukon we run a Family Literacy Center in the Canada Games Center. We run literacy programs and also enable user groups to run learning programs. In the summer we run a literacy program in a heritage house in a park by the river, doing heritage literacy programming. We also have a very successful Yukon wide outreach program, a literacy wall tent and a book bike.

In closing, what should we remember about literacy in the North?

Mulloy: It is really important that our programs be Northern based. Although we can use best practices from all over the world we need to ground our work in good Northern research and Northern providers should be supported. Years ago if something was from "outside" it was generally thought to be better. That is no longer the case. We have tremendous capacity in the North to research, develop and provide excellent programming. ●

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