



Documenting innovative approaches in
essential skills:

To improve understanding and act efficiently

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Report Summary

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1. Presentation

RESDAC is a national network uniting organizations that work for the development of skills and literacy within Francophone communities in Canada. In 2013, RESDAC initiated the ***Designed to Work*** project in order to implement the integrated approach, also called *Busy Intersection*. This initiative aims to provide adults faced with multiple barriers to employment a training program that takes into account their needs, as well as those of their communities, with a view to foster their swift integration into the labour market. Through this approach, we believe that we can help these adults to effectively acquire and develop both technical and generic skills.

This project evolved from findings revealed by numerous studies and observations, which suggest that in Canada, adults with limited literacy skills show a low level of participation in available training programs. For a great majority of them, these programs are structured around the notion of academic upgrading. Indeed, adults who want to work but do not have grade 12 education have to complete their basic training, obtain a high school diploma or its equivalent, and subsequently enroll in professional or technical training. This pathway often proves much too long for people who are focused on supporting themselves and their families, in addition to generating considerable costs for the system.

Further, it is clear that proposed programs are often built around federal or provincial funding guidelines, as well as institutional objectives, rather than being based on the needs and aspirations of job seeking adults or the needs of employment sectors that keep on facing labour shortages.

RESDAC believes that too many human and financial resources are thus wasted, and that it is time to try and establish a more efficient and meaningful system. The *Busy Intersection* approach was successfully tested in the United States, Australia and England, and on a smaller scale in Ontario. This approach emphasizes the importance of taking into account the needs of a given community (job seekers and businesses) and of pooling resources (institutional, community, financial) to provide efficient and qualifying interventions, in a timeframe that spans less than one year.

The shift from an academic paradigm to one that is centered on skills inevitably implies multiple issues and difficulties.

Through its *Designed to Work* project, RESDAC attempted to understand how communities can undertake this paradigm shift. The organization chose to study, through eight onsite experimentations, conditions that are conducive to the implementation of an integrated approach in skills development.

2. The integrated approach

The integrated approach is defined as an initiative where resources associated with programs and services are made available and provided simultaneously, allowing for the design of an educational intervention that meets a particular training need. For adult learners, it means simultaneously acquiring or developing essential, generic, language and technical skills related to a specific employment sector where there is a demand in their community. To design this type of initiative, stakeholders follow the approach put forward by RESDAC, which comprises the four components described below:



Table 1. The four components of the integrated model

The integrated approach is described in great detail in *Towards an Integrated Model to Support the Literacy Development of Francophones in Canada*¹, published by RESDAC in 2011. It is important to note that the model's components should not be construed as a linear path, but rather as developments that influence each other throughout the initiative. Evaluation and feedback are ongoing and inform all other components.

3. Experimentations

The project took place in four provinces: Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. With the support of the four provincial governments, we contacted local organizations that could lead the project in their respective communities.

In each province, two sites were selected, one Francophone and one Anglophone. Up until then, RESDAC's partnerships with Anglophone communities had been occasional, if not rare. However, for this project, it was at once necessary and strategic to lead experimentations in both linguistic settings. In fact, one of the objectives of the *Designed to Work* project is to influence structures and mechanisms that manage skills development for Francophone adults with limited literacy skills. Since these mechanisms are for the most part institutions

¹ Available on line at <http://catalogue.cdeacf.ca/Record.htm?idlist=6&record=19265938124910831109>.

and public programs, they largely transcend the minority-francophone cultural dimension. Consequently, we believed it was sensible to work in collaboration with other linguistic cultural groups (Anglophones, Francophones, Aboriginals and immigrant groups). We seek to capture a global vision of systems that influence skills development among all adults with limited literacy skills, in order to bring about positive change. By doing so, we hope to extend the integrated approach to different cultural and demographic settings, by adapting it to a broad set of realities in the field.

4. *Intent*

To examine the conditions that are conducive to implementing the integrated approach, we determined that our research would focus on the following dimensions:

- New practices in terms of strategic partnerships to integrate resources.
- New practices in designing interventions based on these integrated resources.
- New practices in developing and delivering training centered on a skills-based approach.
- New practices in managing training projects that take into account public policies, to foster the establishment of required conditions for the integrated approach.

4.1 Target audiences

In the four provinces where experimentations took place, we worked locally with relevant community stakeholders and decision-makers (managers of training organizations and members of the steering committees set up for the project, trainers and program designers). We also worked at the provincial level, collaborating with people who, through their positions, could influence government policies and programs and facilitate the design and delivery of training based on the integrated approach.

Our aim was that by the end of the project, all individuals involved in experimentations, regardless of their level of responsibility (local or governmental), have a sound understanding of aspects that allow or hinder the establishment of integrated programming. We also wanted these individuals to develop their ability to implement this approach (at the local level), as well as their ability to generate conditions and systems conducive to supporting the integrated approach (at the governmental level).

4.2 Selected sites

In New Brunswick

- Regional offices of the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour – Anglophone and Francophone sites

In Nova Scotia

- *Équipe alphabétisation de la Nouvelle-Écosse*, Tusket – Francophone site
- Digby Area Learning Association, Digby, then Futureworx, Truro – Anglophone site

In Ontario

- *Centre de formation Nipissing*, Sturgeon Falls – Francophone site
- Job Skills, Markham – Anglophone site

In Saskatchewan

- *Collège Mathieu*, Saskatoon – Francophone site
- Parkland College, Yorkton – Anglophone site

All of these participants were initially referred to us by provincial governments and were selected based on their interest in testing the integrated approach. For them, it implied changing practices in terms of developing their programs, as well in the way they partnered within the community. To do so, they had to include the four components (described in Table 1), and reallocate their service resources with a view to implementing integrated programming.

In agreeing to participate in this action-research, experimentation sites had to commit to design training that would:

- Focus on an occupation that held local employment opportunities.
- Focus on tasks related to the targeted occupation, which could be supported by the strategic development of technical, essential, generic or second-language skills, based on the requirements of the given occupation.
- Focus on practical application of skills.
- Be suitable for work placements in the community.
- Lead to professional qualification or certification.
- Be unique and self-sufficient, to the extent that participating adults would not be required to pursue ulterior training following the intervention.
- Be relatively short (within a year or less).
- Be optimal in terms of planning, development and outcomes, through the establishment of effective partnerships and strategic use of resources.

In return, RESDAC provided sites with ongoing support, in various forms:

- Support from an adult education advisor who provided coaching and advice through all stages of the initiative.

- Researchers who collected and analyzed data drawn from experimentations.
- Yearly financial assistance of \$18,000, covering costs related to their participation in the project.
- Support from the project coordinator.

During the course of the project, there was continuous dialogue between experimentation sites and RESDAC. For local project leaders, their partners and government decision-makers this ongoing sharing fostered listening and the critical distance required for them to readjust and improve their interventions. This reflective practice was needed to establish the approach efficiently and to meet our objective of understanding the conditions that are conducive to its implementation.

Experimentations are described in detail in the full final report, either in the main text or in appendices for experimentations that were subject to a case study.

5. *Analyses and outlooks*

5.1 Overview of issues in the field

This section summarizes what can be surmised from local experimentations, particularly the **innovative and integrated practices** that were put to the test. It must be noted that prior to experimentations, the establishment of strategic partnerships and the resulting integration of resources constitute the foundation of this approach and its success.

The pooling of resources (expertise, programs and infrastructures) is an essential requisite, and an ongoing process within the integrated approach. It ensures that the intervention meets the need of job seeking adults in terms of workplace integration. Creating and sustaining partnerships is time consuming and it involves efforts and patience, whether when working together to develop learner recruitment strategies, building a training program, optimizing infrastructures, and of course, planning the financial structure. All of these challenges can also be leveraged, leading to sharing and positive collaboration among partners, with a view to provide a cohesive and constructive continuum of services in the community.

In experimentations that were completed, these partnerships led to innovation and testing of integrated practices:

5.1A Integrating different clienteles into a single training offering

Training service providers frequently offer training to well-defined audiences, based on available funding for the training in question: employment insurance beneficiaries, immigrants, social assistance recipients, women, people aged 55 and older, etc. Yet, if we choose to build a program according to the needs expressed by a community, and not according to a funder, we then have the opportunity to break down these silos and open our program to any person who is interested in being trained for the targeted occupation. Work then needs to be done to integrate various funding sources and provide the program to a diversified clientele. This makes even more sense in small rural communities, where it is generally harder to bring together a significant number of learners who have similar profiles. This was observed particularly in Nova Scotia.

We also noted that the integration of clienteles is easier to achieve if the training service provider is a community organization. In that case, there is more flexibility in modifying eligibility criteria and in adapting to various audiences. Conversely, educational institutions are still quite reluctant to welcome individuals who have not completed their grade 12 in their vocational training programs.

5.1B Integrating employers from the start

Since the integrated approach intends to meet community needs in terms of employment, it is most appropriate to establish partnerships with local employers as soon as possible. It is these employers who will validate the selection of the occupation for which learners will be trained. They will also determine tasks that their future employees will accomplish, and identify which skills are most important to develop among learners. During

experimentations of the *Designed to Work* project, we repeatedly saw that skills required by employers were not necessarily always part of the curriculum in other vocational training programs.

The local needs analysis served to prepare learners for occupations that they could carry out for many types of employers, thus maximizing their hiring opportunities. For example, in Nova Scotia and Ontario, Francophone project leads determined that many types of employers (from the health field, professional offices, etc.) needed customer service representatives, in Francophone as well as in Anglophone businesses. Consequently, they trained learners according to this need.

Early employer involvement also ensures their active participation in work placement evaluations. However, it was noted that this ‘evaluator’ role may sometimes inconvenience collegial institutions because they are used to being solely responsible for approvals and qualifications. There is also discomfort in accepting that learners with multiple profiles acquire their skills through a program that is, within their institution, reserved to people who have completed their 12th grade.

5.1C Integrating multiple skills into the intervention design

The integrated approach requires that the training program be built around skills that need to be acquired and developed. These skills are determined according to the various tasks related to the targeted occupation. The intervention must allow learners to simultaneously acquire technical, essential and generic skills.

Yet, in Canada, programs designed for people with limited literacy skills are mostly based on the development of essential skills, and even more particularly of literacy skills (reading, writing, numeracy, document use). Here again, the approach set forth by RESDAC disrupted practices and raised questions among project leads. Most of them had to familiarize themselves with the skills-based approach, with methods for developing technical skills, with evaluating generic skills, etc.

In several experimentations, we noted that the design of programs focused on multiple skills presented a real challenge. Whether in terms of program development or existing funding sources, interventions for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills are conceived on the basis of essential skills. As a result, it is difficult for designers to create another curriculum, but also to secure funding that allows the building of a more integrated intervention.

Some organizations accepted the situation and chose to provide their program without integrating skills, therefore offering linear programming; it was subsequently noted, during stocktaking sessions, that learners themselves considered that weeks dedicated to “pure” essential skills made little sense in relation to the targeted occupation.

Conversely, some organizations built their program with a view to reinforce transversal skills, such as generic, second-language or essential skills. This approach served to support

the acquisition of technical skills and to foster workplace integration for people who are usually far removed from the labour market.

5.1D Integrating resources from various partners through strategic community partnerships

The *Busy Intersection* approach is built around the pooling of existing resources (local, human, and material resources, expertise, programs, educational infrastructures, etc.). Efficient integration of various partners' resources into the intervention increases the ability to provide a comprehensive intervention that meets the multiple needs of job seeking adults with limited literacy skills (several types of pedagogical support, opportunities for professional qualification, integration of work placements, etc.).

Strategic partnerships and financial structure: The integrated approach relies on multiple partnerships and it must count on a financial structure based on the pooling of partner's resources. It is also important to consider these partners' administrative imperatives, such as their field of competency, as well as their responsibilities and accountability requirements toward their respective funders. This may lead to challenges in a context where work cultures are quite different. Within strategic community partnerships, exploring how to pool together each partner's resources will help to determine whether a joint integrated training project can be achieved, given the availability of partners' educational, financial and community resources.

Strategic partnerships to recognize and approve learnings: One of the main issues raised by the *Designed to Work* project related to providing participating adults with a form of recognition of their learnings, such as an official certificate or professional qualification. Here, the aim was on the one hand to legitimize the training provided through the project, and on the other hand, to ensure the best possible working conditions for graduates. Partnering educational institutions were to provide this formal recognition of learnings.

In reality, as the project evolved, recognition and qualification became major, if not unsurmountable challenges. Here again, we noted that colleges were reluctant to share their authority in terms of approval; at the provincial level, administrative considerations sometimes thwarted the qualification process for learners from experimentation sites. Conversely, certification was made possible (or is in the process of being made possible) in two sites (Anglophone projects in Nova Scotia and Ontario), thanks to the partnerships that were created.

5.2 Overview of governmental and institutional issues

The integrated approach presents many challenges for public and institutional authorities. It must be noted that over the last decade, the organization and funding of adult education has seen profound changes. Efforts related to training job seeking adults with limited literacy skills emphasized essential skills; adult education was often relegated to departments focused on economic development; accountability requirements were increased; and expenses were being streamlined... In the end, it is obvious that the adult education system

has become more complex to the point of possibly generating new institutional barriers for adult learners.

Through the *Designed to Work* project, we drew up inventories of government programs and strategies linked to training and skills development among adults. Analysis of these inventories confirms that the current system fosters working in silos for all actors involved in adult education.

Provincial participation in the *Designed to Work* project also raised some issues, which are described here.

5.2A Philosophical Issues

Even though the presentation of the integrated approach generated great interest among provincial public servants who were contacted, there still was some reluctance in moving forward. Indeed, the notion of integrating multiple skills into a single intervention was met with some practical difficulties. This is partly due to governmental structures themselves, that are designed to divide interventions according to the type of approach (on the one hand, academic upgrading and on the other, vocational training, etc.).

It was noted that the integrated approach gained momentum at the government level, when public servants had already reflected on the complementary nature of their services, the need to break down silos between their programs, etc. However, the challenge that still needs to be overcome in order to promote the integrated approach is linked to the andragogical approach itself. As mentioned earlier, for many years essential skills have been the means and the end in operating adult training for some clienteles. They have become the foundation of basic training programs. However, training programs focused on essential skills have remained rooted in an academic paradigm: we often teach essential skills without necessarily implementing a skills-based approach. Yet among other things, the integrated approach relies on a skills-based approach within the intervention. There is a sort of fundamental andragogical and philosophical incompatibility, which may have hindered the implementation of the integrated approach.

As already explained, the targeted occupations in the interventions were selected on the basis of needs expressed by local communities. Partnering educational institutions were often hesitant to get involved in the integrated approach, arguing that the occupation in question could not be held by someone who had not gone through their training curriculum. These institutions frequently insisted that an occupation in *health care support services* required high-level academic training. This led to several misunderstandings, all the more so as potential employers stated they were prepared to hire competent individuals, whether or not they had a high-school diploma. This situation highlights the extent to which institutions are sometimes determined to protect their prerogatives at the expense of opportunities provided through an open and inclusive approach.

As for community organizations, the ease with which they adopted the integrated approach mainly stemmed from the nature of their mission. Generally, employment organizations

displayed more compatibility with the approach than most of the training and/or literacy organizations. In fact, employment organizations are used to operate while closely monitoring labour market trends and their clients' needs. As a result, they were able to adapt more easily to an approach that promotes the establishment of local partnerships and a program design based on multiple and complex needs.

5.2B Administrative and institutional Issues

In provinces targeted by the project, as in the rest of Canada, responsibilities related to adult skills training and development are shared among many departments. Responsibilities are very often distributed between departments that are in charge of education, labour, economic development and community services.

Consequently, it proved very difficult to bring together people who were in charge. It was noted that public servants from one given department have little knowledge about other departments' areas of competency, even when their missions are quite similar. This is also true between directorates or divisions within single departments.

The system's complexity explains the difficulties encountered by organizations who wanted to secure funding for integrated programming in the field, funding mechanisms being as compartmentalized as they are.

Nonetheless, it was also noted that a province's participation in the project fostered contacts between heads of divisions.

6. Conditions required to implement the integrated approach in skills development

Through field experimentations, this project aimed to understand the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the implementation of our approach. By understanding these mechanisms, it would be easier to replicate and adapt the approach to different contexts across Canada.

We identified **nine required conditions**, described below, and developed in more detail in the full final report.

1. First condition: Provincial governments (and their key departments) interested, motivated and demonstrating leadership in setting up the integrated approach at the provincial level.

Recommendation: That provincial governments provide a political framework that fosters the design and establishment of qualifying and flexible training initiatives, based on the strategic development of integrated skills, focused on essential tasks and the development of other types of skills. This approach should be deployed simultaneously, under a single intervention to respond more efficiently to the needs of job seeking adults with limited literacy skills, and to facilitate their swift integration into the labour market.

2. Second condition: Create spaces for permanent dialogue among key actors from the labour sector so that communities take ownership of, and put into practice, the integrated approach.

Recommendation: That provincial governments create spaces for dialogue among relevant departments and their partners in the field (employers, training agencies, employment agencies, etc.) in order to plan, organize and set up conditions that are conducive to the implementation of the integrated approach for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.

Recommendation: That provincial governments facilitate the establishment of local strategic partnerships rooted in a climate of mutual trust, collaboration and openness; based on dialogue in order to better understand others, and on collective learning to act together more effectively.

3. Third condition: Design a clear strategy for communities to take ownership of, and put into practice, the integrated approach.

Recommendation: That provincial governments systematically initiate needs analysis processes at the local level, to generate local dialogues surrounding the skills-based approach focused on essential tasks for targeted employment sectors.

Recommendation: That provincial governments initially target local leaders who are in charge of the relevant areas, and who are willing to operate within the framework of this approach.

4. Fourth condition: Change institutional practices for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.

Recommendation: That provincial governments reframe their public policies and guidelines to modify some institutional practices in the provision of selected qualifying training programs. This would ensure that some of these programs are delivered through a skills-based approach, more aligned with the needs of the labour market and those of job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.

Recommendation: That provincial governments modify some of the eligibility criteria for qualifying training (among other things, reduce the institutional barriers related to requirements in terms of the level of schooling achieved), in order to facilitate access for a greater number of job seeking adults and their integration into this type of training.

5. Fifth condition: Break down silos in government funding mechanisms.

Recommendation: That provincial governments put in place intra- and interdepartmental management and funding methods that are cohesive, complementary and integrated, as needed. It would then be easier to effectively identify departmental priorities and resources (human and financial), to better support integrated interventions in skills development for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.

Recommendation: That provincial governments develop integrated funding strategies to facilitate complementary work among organizations in the field, and to support projects based on an integrated approach in skills development.

Recommendation: That provincial governments put in place funding mechanisms that facilitate the bringing together of various local clienteles of job seeking adults interested in being trained for a targeted employment sector, to ensure that a sufficient number of learners participate in training projects.

6. Sixth condition: Support capacity development among relevant actors in the field.

In surveys of stakeholders participating in the *Designed to Work* project, aiming to determine their perception of the knowledge and skills needed to support the integrated approach put forth by the project, some findings emerged. Here are some of them, drawn from the evaluation report of these surveys:

“It can be observed that stakeholders are well aware of their organizations’ strengths and weaknesses in implementing an integrated intervention. However, some aspects of the external environment seem more nebulous, particularly with regard to the difficulties that loom over the implementation of an integrated intervention, as well as government programs and services that may support the various components... Stakeholders demonstrate a high level of confidence in their knowledge about conducting an analysis of employability and educational resources in their communities. This level of confidence declines slightly with regard to analyzing the cultural and socioeconomic context within their communities, and even more so when referring to the needs of job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.”

Recommendation: That provincial governments put in place funding mechanisms that support specific development activities related to the implementation of integrated training projects, and that support professional development of human resources so these activities can be carried out.

7. Seventh condition: Foster capacity-building among actors within relevant provincial departments.

Recommendation: That provincial governments provide opportunities for professional development to key employees within departments that will be called upon to support the implementation of the integrated approach in skills development for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.

Recommendation: That provincial governments form intra- and interdepartmental teams (inter-directorate or division) to foster a broad and complementary vision regarding public programs and associated departmental resources (human and financial), so as to use them to support more effectively integrated interventions in skills development designed for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.

8. Eighth condition: Harmonize policies and strategies between the federal government and provincial governments.

Recommendation: That the federal government create a space for dialogue between its Ministry of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour and provincial governments, to foster the establishment of conditions required to support the integrated approach in skills development for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills, in a cohesive and complementary manner.

Recommendation: That provincial governments and the federal government study and analyze the impact of Canada Job Fund Agreements on provincial policies and initiatives for clienteles composed of job seeking adults with limited literacy skills.

Recommendation: That the federal government study how it can support more effectively, and in complementarity with provincial governments, the integrated approach in skills development for job seeking adults with limited literacy skills from cultural minorities, namely:

- Francophones living in minority settings
- Aboriginals
- Immigrants

9. Ninth condition: Put in place a research component ensuring a sound understanding of issues related to skills development among the Canadian workforce (knowledge of the environment, understanding issues, barriers to training, etc.)

Recommendation: That the federal government allocate sufficient funds for a research component specifically focused on questions related to integrated skills development and its multiple issues. The component would allow provincial partners from the labour sector to

determine their research priorities. In addition, through its implementation criteria, this component would take into account linguistic minorities, Aboriginals, the issue of immigrant workers and field practitioners.

Recommendation: That the federal government, in collaboration with its provincial partners:

- Conduct a literature review/state of affairs regarding research about issues linked to public policy and government programs, in connection with:
 - The challenges of training a workforce composed of people with limited literacy skills or schooling.
 - The integrated approach to develop multiple skills.
- Conduct a literature review/state of affairs regarding research and analytical papers:
 - On challenges and solutions for skills development among job seeking adults with limited literacy skills from cultural minorities.
 - On challenges and solutions for skills development among job seeking adults with limited literacy skills from rural and semi-urban communities.

Recommendation: That the federal government reframe its funding programs for field research, so they are more closely aligned with a process of reflective practice and positioned from the point of view of ongoing learning/development and research.

7. Conclusion

From results of experimentations led through the *Designed to Work* project, we gained a better understanding of the conditions that are required for its implementation. These results also confirm that this approach makes sense and holds great potential. Several testimonies comfort us in the notion that integrated interventions in skills development *do* meet needs and *are* effective solutions.

However, multiple barriers still need to be overcome, whether at the local, institutional or governmental level. We believe that the integrated approach would benefit from further experimentation, deployment and adaptation. To this end, we hope that skills development among adults will be sufficiently researched and funded to support working adults, but also those who are looking for employment.