

The Impact of Globalization on Adult Education in a Have-Not Province

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Abstract

This study examines the state of contemporary adult education in New Brunswick. New Brunswick is currently experiencing an increase in unemployment as well as the loss of traditional employment bases. Concurrently, there are greater numbers of adults who are finding themselves with no clear employment direction. One of the places they are ending up is in formal and non-formal adult education programs. Our belief is that the purpose of adult education in the province of New Brunswick has undergone a shift, moving away from an ethic of adult education for personal, social, and political change towards a neo-liberal skills agenda.

Key words: knowledge economy, role of government, globalized labour market, change

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Introduction

Many prominent writers and thinkers in the field of adult education claim that there has been a shift in the focus of adult education over recent years. We have moved away from an ethos of personal and social development towards a focus more interested in skill development and knowledge acquisition. This shift in focus mirrors a general political shift towards neo-liberalism. This article reports on the findings of research undertaken to consider the extent to which such a shift has impacted adult education programs in the province of New Brunswick. The article provides a general overview of adult education in the context of neo-liberal politics and the knowledge economy. We then present our findings of this research, an analysis of those findings, and conclude with a discussion of the implications of those findings.

Education is commonly viewed as a panacea for social and economic problems. This is particularly so in an era of globalization and the knowledge economy. In such an environment, governments, international organizations, and industry place heavy emphasis on the importance of education and training for economic development. The focus on training is particularly strong in the context of the 'new' or 'knowledge' economy. Theorists, too, emphasize the need for a well-trained population with regard to economic development. According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (as cited in Rubenson & Beddie, 2004), "education is becoming less distinct from the economy" (p. 154).

The ability to participate and compete in the global market forms the foundation of many domestic policy decisions, particularly those related to education, economic development, and the labour market. The extent to which education and training are seen as the key to successful economic development and participation in the global economy is amply evident in even a cursory glance at the documentation of many national and sub-national level governments as well as international organizations and the literature. Discussions of the knowledge economy are rife with reference to training and education as the key to participation in the global economy. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) in its 2002 publication, "Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians: Canada's Innovation Strategy", reports, "Countries that succeed in the 21st century will be those with citizens who are creative, adaptable and skilled" (p. 5). The belief in the relationship between education, training, and economic development is pervasive. Ashton and Green (1996) write, "In some cases, this link is conceived in quite simple terms: conventional wisdom has emerged wherein 'better' education or training is assumed to lead automatically to improved economic performance" (p. 11). Coucherne (n.d.) writes:

The most exciting feature of this new era ... is that it is privileging knowledge and human capital in much the same manner as the Industrial Revolution privileged physical capital. As such, knowledge and human capital are not only at the leading edge of international competitiveness and wealth creation, they are also the drivers for sustainable growth and productivity enhancement (p. 1).

The assumption, then, is that an educated and trained population, in and of itself, will lead to economic development.

Though there have been some recent signs of a re-appreciation of the relationship between adult education, social justice, and civil society, the predominant view of adult education and lifelong learning remains geared to economic development. Despite the fact that

there have been claims made that lifelong learning is concerned with more than economic gain (Walters, 2000), education, and, most especially post-compulsory training, serves as a means for individuals and nations to participate in the global, knowledge economy. This approach has been strongly criticized in the literature in recent years (see, e.g., Cruikshank, 2006, 2008; Field, 2006; Jarvis, 2007) for its reliance on human capital theory (itself heavily criticized in recent years) and as a tool to further the neo-liberal agenda (White, 2004). As Esland and Ahier (1999) write:

At the level of rhetoric, at least, education and training policy continues to play an important role in sustaining the ideological commitment to the neo-liberal concept of globalization, largely because it has now become the default institution for nurturing the psychological conditions necessary for 'competitiveness'. The notion that in order to compete in the global economy, the modern nation state requires a highly trained and 'flexible' workforce in which knowledge- and people-based skills form the basis of a 'self-perpetuating learning society' (FEFC, 1997) has become the *sine qua non* of the age (pp. 2-3).

Regardless of the inherent problems of a knowledge economy – the marginalization of those not in a position to take advantage of it, be that for social or economic reasons – it is our belief that the over-emphasis on skills development has supplanted some of the original core ideals of adult education – personal development and social justice.

The Context

New Brunswick is currently a have-not province, marked by increasing unemployment and loss of traditional employment bases. The national unemployment rate in Canada currently hovers at 7.4%. In New Brunswick this figure is closer to 10.4% overall, with the rural areas having even greater unemployment topping out at 19.6% in some areas (Statistics Canada, 2012). There can be many interpretations of what these unemployment figures mean but one obvious reason is a decline in available jobs. It can also mean those who have been displaced in this declining economy do not possess the education and skills required for the available labour market. In New Brunswick, adults, both by choice and necessity, are finding themselves in adult education programs in greater numbers in both formal settings of university and college, and non-formal training programs.

Rubenson, Yoon, & Desjardin (2007) in their report on Adult Learning in Canada, describe the Atlantic region as having the highest increase in levels of participation in adult education between 1994 and 2003, as compared to the rest of Canada. This is seen as a positive improvement, with 60% growth in participation in the region (Rubenson et al., 2007, p.22). However, we contend that this number is also troubling because at the same time we are seeing a higher rate of unemployment and the return to adult education is based on an assumption that sending workers who are displaced back to training programs or formal education will somehow change outcomes and contribute to economic development. As Adamuti-Trache (2000) reminds us, lifelong education is no longer an optional activity, but rather the solution for living in a global society. The economy in New Brunswick, however, is not reaping the benefits of lifelong education. While increasing numbers of adults are participating in adult education, New Brunswick's economic situation continues to decline. Thus, while many adults are returning to school and training with the aim to find new jobs, these supposed jobs are becoming even

scarcer. Furthermore, while the numbers reported by Rubenson et al. (2007), in the Atlantic region are encouraging in terms of participation in adult education, the Atlantic region in general is only discussed on 5 pages out of 104 of a national report on participation in adult education. This suggests to us a need for further investigation on the status of adult education in New Brunswick and the rest of Atlantic Canada.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of globalization on the current state of adult education in New Brunswick. One of our key questions is who is conducting adult education in New Brunswick and what does it currently look like? While the history of adult education runs deep in the Maritimes, from university extension and the Coady legacy to government funded training schemes, our belief is that there has been a shift in the purposes of adult education away from an ethic of adult education for personal, social, and political change towards a neo-liberal skills agenda. We also assert that this shift reflects broader trends internationally as evidenced by the OECD and other international political bodies.

The Study

The data for this paper consists of document analysis of existing adult education programs in the province of New Brunswick. Our document analysis consisted of what Bowen (2009) describes as a systematic review that required our data be examined and interpreted in order to “elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (p.27). Our data was gathered from government sources as well as independent providers and publicly funded programs.

Our theoretical approach uses a critical framework as a lens for exploring the discourses around a neo-liberal agenda. The concept of discourse is helpful for examining the different forms of power and how participation in adult education in New Brunswick has seen to be improving while at the same time the province is seen to be in crisis. Benjamin (2012) reminds us that, power relations are inscribed in discourses as knowledge, and power relationships are achieved by a construction of “truths” about the social and natural world (see Luke, 1995). Discourse is then both a social practice that constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices (Phillips & Jørgenson, 2002). What this means is that language used in the development of adult education programs should be considered within its social context and, moreover, it is important to examine how discourses around the neo-liberal skills agenda function ideologically.

We also consider the issues through a political lens. White (2004) has found that adult education and training cannot be separated from the larger political landscape. Youngman (2000) notes that a political economy approach “looks at how the historical evolution and contemporary nature of the capitalist mode of production conditions the relationship between adult education and society” (pp. 3-4). A political economy approach is called for because we are investigating not only the current state of adult education in New Brunswick, but the way in which the political, neo-liberal agenda influences that state.

The Effects of Globalization on New Brunswick Adult Education

The nature of adult education in Canada is diverse and complex (Foley, 2004). In our systematic review we looked at public and private, as well as federal and provincial programs, relevant to adult education in New Brunswick. Research is currently showing that governments have pulled out of much of the provision of training in many industrialized nations. This is also true for

Canada. Over the last two decades the Canadian federal and provincial governments have devolved and decentralized many of their responsibilities to lower levels of government, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations. This has impacted the provision of adult education. Where the federal government once provided training, the current trend is to outsource training to private and/or quasi-governmental agencies. While governments may remain *involved* in the provision of adult education and training, that involvement is generally through various funding and evaluation schemes with private and quasi-governmental groups doing the actual training. Additionally, continued cuts in federal transfer payments to the provinces has meant a reduction in the amount of funding available for education and training at the provincial level.

Foley (2004) rightfully notes that there have been important changes to adult education over the last 30 years. With the loss of university extension and the shift in the emphasis towards lifelong learning and skills development, adult education is becoming more businesslike in its organization and offerings. Our research shows this to be true in New Brunswick as well.

Findings

We have categorized the findings of our research into two categories: the role of the Government of Canada in providing and funding adult education programs that affect New Brunswick, and the public and private programs and initiatives in the province of New Brunswick. In the second case we examine provincial programs and initiatives, and the role of private business, both big and small, and the provision of adult education in the province.

The Government of Canada

For the most part, in keeping with previous research on the subject, the Government of Canada's role in the provision of adult education and training is, by and large, financing. The federal government supports adult education and training through the provision of various grants, RRSP benefits, loans, and bonds. There are, however, a select few programs where training is actually offered through a federal department or agency. For example, the Canadian Forces Aboriginal Entry Program, the Aboriginal Training Program in Museum Practices, the Cadets Program, the Junior Canadian Rangers Program, and the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada Program all provide training specific to skills development, trades, and vocational programs (Service Canada, 2012). There are a number of government departments involved in the provision of adult education in one form or another. By far the largest department with that responsibility is Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). At the provincial level, HRSDC funded programs are accessed through Service Canada offices.

In keeping with the neo-liberal agenda for a market driven economy, the federal government emphasizes increasing Canada's educational presence in the global marketplace through Canada's International Education Strategy. The program is aimed at attracting international students to study in Canada, and at increasing the export and marketization of Canada's educational services abroad (Foreign Affairs & International Trade Canada, 2011).

Adult education in the province of New Brunswick: Public provision

The Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour (PETL) works with 12 Regional Adult Learning Committees to deliver community adult learning services. The New Brunswick government does not deliver the training, but instead, provides the funding while outsourcing the training through these regional agents. Community Adult Learning Program (CALP) offers academic and literacy programs through Community Adult Literacy Centre's. The Adult Learning Centre's, in conjunction with CALP, provide computer access, programs to assist with General Education Development (GED) testing (Math, English, and French preparatory courses), software and hardware skills, and social media education to adults living in rural and urban areas. The Centre's are designed to increase the employability level of adults in the province by developing their job preparatory skills and increasing their literacy levels. There is, of late, a greater focus in these programs on digital literacy. That is, these programs are interested more in ensuring that participants are better prepared in the use of electronic and digital media as job preparation rather than the traditional focus on basic literacy and numeracy. PETL describes their Academic Program as providing "training to help learners acquire basic knowledge and skills to strengthen their literacy and numeracy levels" (Government of New Brunswick, September 2012).

Literacy initiatives are the common denominator for the majority of not-for-profit adult training and development programs in New Brunswick. In 2003, adult literacy levels in New Brunswick were at 44% compared to the national level of 52%, and 56% of the population had literacy scores below level 3 (HRSDC, 2012), and that figure climbed to 48% by 2008 (Parent Central, 2008). An International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) administered by Statistics Canada in 2003 further reinforced the sorry state of literacy in New Brunswick (2005). Citing the same survey, the Director of HRSDC's National Learning Policy Research determined that "less than half of New Brunswick's working-age population (16-65) have the literacy skills required for coping successfully in today's world" (Perry, 2006, p.2).

In 2009, the government of New Brunswick published "Working Together for Adult Literacy", a strategy document on the issue of literacy in the province. The document determined four strategic priorities to improve provincial literacy skills:

1. Reduce barriers and increase participation;
2. Increase the number and range of effective adult literacy learning opportunities;
3. Ensure the quality and effectiveness of adult literacy programs; and
4. Strengthen partnerships to develop a robust and effective adult literacy system (Government of New Brunswick, 2009, p. 7).

In 2010, the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick (LCNB) released its "Strategic Plan 2010 – 2013." In response, the Community Adult Learning Services Branch Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour (PETL) released its Action Plan 2010-2013 in 2010, which indicated that research would be undertaken to determine the best possible methods for addressing these four strategic priorities. These priorities appear redundant in the face of Rubenson et al.'s (2007) assertions that participation in adult education in Atlantic Canada has risen by 60%.

In researching the province of New Brunswick's education website (Government of New Brunswick, 2012), it would appear that the province offers a number of adult education

programs. However, there are many overlaps among the programs listed on this site. Several of the program descriptions are worded similarly, with subtle differences. For example, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour (PETL) lists 11 adult education programs, but three of them, Adult Literacy Services, Community Adult Learning Centres, and Community Adult Learning Program work together under the same literacy mission. What this shows us, however, is reflective of the emphasis on literacy as a skill for employment.

Adult education in the province of New Brunswick: Private provision

In New Brunswick private adult education programs are often found in international and national corporations that offer in-house training to their employees in such areas as heavy machinery certifications, environmental practice, leadership and mentoring, and software certification. Many of these companies also provide training and mentoring for professional advancement within the corporation as well as conference and seminar funding, and tuition re-imbursment (relevant to employment) for all employees, from entry-level and to middle management. The larger companies and institutions that serve only provincial or the Atlantic region likewise offer in-house training in areas relevant to all employment levels. However, detailed information regarding those opportunities was often unavailable and difficult to locate.

From our analysis it appears that employers in New Brunswick are offering more in-house employee development training by optimizing their current human resources employees. By using internal staff to deliver training and development initiatives, it can be assumed that this strategy is a cost-saving measure. Several employers provide mentorship programs in an effort to help staff develop, which are likely designed to retain talent and reduce turnover. When words such as 'development,' and 'growth,' are used to describe the organization's value statement, the opportunities that present from our analysis are related to role-specific growth, job enhancement, and greater pay. Although each employer's education and learning descriptions are limited in scope, not surprisingly, it is evident that education for social change is not part of the business sector's agenda.

Some of the kinds of programs found within the business sector in New Brunswick were programs that focused on the orientation of new employees as well as specialized Executive Training, such as the Executive Development, Middle Manager Development, Career Assignment (for entry-level executives), and Management Trainee Programs. Other programs focused on the employability skills needed to succeed in the workplace. There were other examples of programs with a focus on 'soft skills' training such as teamwork, decision-making, and leadership. Additionally, many of the businesses investigated in New Brunswick offered courses specific to a given position such as WHMIS, banking, investment, capital markets, technology, and operation.

Analysis of Findings

One of the key findings of this research is the tension between policy and practice; what government documentation says is happening and what is actually happening on the ground. The rhetoric surrounding the policy documents analyzed for this research does indicate an emphasis on adult education and training in New Brunswick (Robichaud, personal communication, July 12, 1012). However, closer examination reveals that the emphasis is on adult literacy and adult literacy programs rather than a more comprehensive approach to adult

education. At the same time, there have been substantial cuts to adult education generally at the province and at the federal level. For example, the Canadian Council on Learning has had its funding cut and was dissolved as a non-profit corporation. Provincially, the New Brunswick Federation of Labour reports that recent cuts to the provincial budget has resulted in a \$1 million cut to adult learning services (<http://nbfl.m5i.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Federal-and-Provincial-Budgets-Sacrificing-People-to-the-Economy-.pdf>). It is the contradictory nature of these findings that is interesting here. On the one hand, we have documentation from both levels of government that state adult education is significant. This is, as we have noted, especially true in the context of the knowledge and global economies. On the other hand, however, we have substantial cuts to significant adult education organizations, which must mean a reduction in overall services. As adult educators, it is this contradiction between the rhetoric and the practice that we must continue to highlight and interrogate.

We have also noted our finding that the vast majority of adult education programs in New Brunswick are focused on adult literacy and adult literacy skills development. There has been a trend in New Brunswick towards conflating adult education with adult literacy programs. As noted above, much of the documentation found pertaining to adult education in New Brunswick (especially in government and non-profit sectors) focuses on literacy initiatives and literacy programs. In the light of the overwhelming emphasis at both levels of government on the global market place, and the role that education and training can play for individuals (and nations) to enter into and remain in that global market place, this is not surprising.

Lastly, this research has found that in keeping with national and international trends, the emphasis and focus on adult education programs remains on skill and knowledge development for the labour market. Our analysis of the Government of Canada's involvement with adult education programs shows that many of these programs are aligned with knowledge economy principles (HRSDC, 2002) and are influenced by the mandate to enhance employability skills to make Canada a leader in the global marketplace. We see the same emphasis in New Brunswick where programs are geared to literacy (and recently digital) literacy programs as a means through which to enter the labour market and make New Brunswick competitive.

Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education and Practice

Education is shifting from what was once prominent in developing active participation and citizenship, to producing a self-sufficient workforce that is prepared for the demands of the ever-changing and globalized labour-market. Lehmann and Taylor (2003) argue that employability skills demonstrate a new kind of vocationalism, marked by the influence of the Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile (ESP) (McLaughlin, 1992). What the ESP provides is an interpretation of specific competencies and learning outcomes. Employability skills are generally thought of as the combination of generic 'soft' and 'hard' skills or competencies that are needed by workers (Williams, 2005). 'Soft' skills refer to behaviours and aptitudes, such as teamwork, which are believed necessary for employment, whereas the 'hard' skills are specific quantifiable skills such as writing a resume or cover letter (Benjamin, 2009). A key aspect to this understanding of employability is the presumption of sameness in the expectation that workers all need the same generic sets of skills and behaviours.

We must also consider the kind of economic development and job creation under discussion. In tandem with a neo-liberal market ideology and globalization comes the knowledge economy. Most Western, industrialized countries now view knowledge as the basis of their economies. In

the government documentation reviewed for this research, the focus was entirely on the knowledge economy. However, this is somewhat of a disconnect here between the rhetoric and the reality as many of us live in regions often largely untouched by the knowledge economy. New Brunswick is in just such a region.

As evidenced in the data, the knowledge economy and education's role in it remains at the forefront of economic development thinking in this country and this region. A significant criticism of the knowledge economy has been the potential for a large gap to develop between those who know and those who work. There are concerns that a knowledge-based economy leaves lesser skilled individuals on the margins of the workforce. Attention should be given to the emphasis placed on the knowledge economy itself and the predilection for high skills training for communities often untouched by the knowledge economy. Does not such an emphasis, especially in the policy sphere, in and of itself, marginalize many regardless of whether they have or can obtain high skills? Not all workers have access to the knowledge economy. Care must be taken in policy formulation to recognize that not all workers can participate in the new economy. Furthermore, policy focused on developing and enhancing the knowledge economy must assume conditions that do not exist in many regions.

Continued *unquestioned* emphasis on training (and education) for the knowledge economy, and the subsequent influence that this will undoubtedly have on policy development, has great potential to marginalize individuals, communities and regions that do not possess the physical, economic, educational, social, and community infrastructures to support the knowledge economy.

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