



Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills

Annual Report: Synthesis and Next Steps

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Since its establishment in December 1991, SRDC has conducted over 350 projects and studies for various federal and provincial departments, municipalities, as well as other public and non-profit organizations. SRDC has offices located in Ottawa and Vancouver, and satellite offices in Calgary and Montreal.

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INTRODUCTION

The Enhancing Displaced Workers Literacy and Essential Skills project is a collaborative project that is managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). The overall goal of the project is to enhance knowledge and raise awareness of promising Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) interventions for displaced workers in Canada to improve their employability.

Today's labour market places significant emphasis on LES. Unfortunately, large segments of the available workforce do not have the necessary level of LES, which can intensify the impacts of job displacement. Data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), as reported by Statistics Canada (2013), indicates that 49 per cent of Canadians aged 16-65 do not have Level 3 literacy while 55 per cent do not have Level 3 math skills. These gaps are particularly evident in specific population groups. For example, nearly 60 per cent of Indigenous peoples in Canada have a literacy level less than level 3. As well, average literacy and numeracy levels are lower for older workers age 45 to 65 than for 16 to 44 year olds. With low LES and digital skills, workers face increasing challenges to re-integrate into the labour market. There is a clear need to support displaced workers to become re-employed in more secure positions and sectors.

As part of this project, SRDC is working with Decoda Literacy Solutions and project partners to evaluate promising LES training interventions for displaced workers in Canada. The following report provides a synthesis of the research conducted to date in the first year of the project (April 1, 2019 to March 31, 2020), with a focus on identifying promising practices and outlining next steps for developing the intervention beta tests. The results of the following research components are included in this report¹:

1. **Literature Review and Media Scan** – a review of published and grey literature that provides an overview of displaced workers in Canada and identifies best practices related to LES interventions.
2. **Interviews and Focus Groups** – interviews with the 10 B.C. Outreach Team Leads and focus groups in their communities that included service providers, community members, and employers who work with displaced or formerly displaced workers. The purpose of the interviews and focus groups was to better understand the 10 Outreach Team organizations and their communities, the needs of displaced workers, regional strengths and assets, gaps and opportunities, and how best to reach out to displaced workers.
3. **Pilot Survey of Displaced Workers in B.C.** – the objective of the displaced workers survey is to better understand the overall context and needs of displaced workers in B.C. who have low LES skills, including what supports would be most useful to their needs. The pilot survey was completed in order to ensure that the survey is ready for full implementation.

This report provides an executive summary of promising practices based on the research and analysis completed by the SRDC team, as well as recommended next steps for the evaluation of the pilot interventions in the next phase of the DWLES project.

¹ For details on each of these research components, please see the individual research reports.

SYNTHESIS OF PROMISING PRACTICES

The following section provides a synthesis of the research findings from the literature review, media scan, interviews and focus groups, with a particular focus on informing considerations for the intervention beta tests. The synthesis below is divided into two sections: contextual factors and intervention-based factors.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Contextual factors are areas that need to be considered that are not related to the design of the intervention, but rather to the broader context in which the intervention is being implemented. Three areas related to context have been highlighted in the research which will be important for consideration when selecting potential pilot sites: factors related to need, capacity, and opportunities.

Need

The first contextual factor is the needs of displaced workers. It was made clear in the literature review and media scan that in terms of selecting communities for potential beta test, it is important to understand the extent of the need in a particular community, the characteristics of the need, feasibility of addressing the need, and whether the need aligns with overall project objectives. For example, what is the nature of the displacement events in the community, including the characteristics of the impacted workers as well as the broader political and labour market context? Are LES interventions the best means for supporting these types of workers? Is it even feasible to help these workers through this project, i.e. are these workers accessible in terms of factors such as geography or the reach of the primary organization that would be implementing the intervention? Understanding the dynamics of the community's need is a critical first step for deciding if an LES approach, as well as the overall scope and direction of this project in general, is appropriate for supporting displaced workers in a particular community.

Organization and Community Capacity

Capacity is an essential component for developing a successful intervention, as without a certain level of organizational commitment and community readiness to take on the task of developing and implementing an LES intervention, it will not be successful. Although capacity can and should be developed throughout the process of establishing and implementing the intervention—making it a key outcome of the project—there nonetheless needs to be an initial level of capacity for the intervention to establish momentum and succeed. For example, does the lead organization have the leadership qualities and human and financial resources needed for managing and leading the LES intervention? Does the organization have a strong relationship to the community, including other service providers or support organizations? The level of capacity in the community overall is also very critical. It is important to understand how engaged key community stakeholder are in the project, what are the capacity of these organizations, including their strengths and weakness, and how these factors might affect the outcomes of the intervention.

Opportunities

The last factor related to context is opportunities. What are the opportunities that are available in each community that may make the LES intervention successful? For example, will local

businesses be in a position to be engaged throughout the development process to ensure training is aligned with local labour market needs? Does the lead organization have a track record in the community for developing similar types of initiatives that have been successful in the past? Is there a particular project or program that has been successful that could be scaled-up to include LES programming or focus on displaced workers? An LES intervention should build off key opportunities that are already present in a community.

INTERVENTION-BASED FACTORS

Intervention-based factors are those areas that are seen as best practices specifically related to the design and implementation of the intervention itself. The following are the key areas that were identified in the research.

Local and Place-Based Approach

Findings from the literature review, and particularly the interviews and focus groups, emphasize that it is critical to take a place-based approach to designing and implementing LES interventions for displaced workers. This means that the intervention is community driven and connected, with strong ownership among key community partners. The lead organization understands community strengths and weaknesses and ensures connections to local community services and resources, including fostering peer-to-peer supports. Project partners also have a strong understanding of the need in their community related to displaced workers, the detailed characteristics of these workers, and the local and regional labour market context. The intervention has strong connections with local employers and unions to ensure that support services are aligned with the needs of the local or regional labour market. Overall, successful interventions identified in the literature review and focus groups were community-based that arose in response to a specific community need.

A Holistic Approach to Supporting Clients

The research findings also emphasize the need to take a holistic approach to supporting displaced workers. This includes not just supporting workers' skill improvement, but also their broader well-being, including physical and mental health, family life and community connection. An area particularly identified in the literature is understanding how supporting the needs of the workers' family members may help to further improve their outcomes. It is also important to understand workers' connections to the broader community and the role that community social connection can play in their employment journeys.

Individually Tailored Support

The research was clear that supports need to be individually tailored to each worker's particular needs in order to engage individual interest and commitment, and to be meaningful and applicable in terms of achieving their goals. This may sound like a simple concept, but in practice it is very challenging and time consuming. It requires conducting a detailed and comprehensive needs assessment of each participant at the initial stages of an intervention. This needs assessment takes a holistic approach, assessing skills gaps and needs, but also broader areas such as physical and mental health, family life and work context. Without understanding all of these factors as a whole, one component that is missed may prove to be a critical factor that hinders an individual from progressing in their goals. For example, if participants are dealing with issues finding childcare, they may not be able to engage in training.

Other examples of characteristics that are important to identify include: age and work tenure – younger or less experienced workers will have very different goals and needs than older workers with longer tenure; level of attachment to the labour market – workers with a greater attachment (i.e. have a strong work history) will require different support than workers with less attachment (i.e. those who have only worked sporadically). Further, Indigenous populations will require a very distinct approach from other populations due to geography, culture, community and other personal or contextual factors. Similarly, visible minorities and new Canadians will also require unique approaches that address such issues as language barriers, social inclusion, and cultural connections. Finally, it is also clear from the research that an initial assessment is only a starting point and that continual evaluation and adaptation needs to be conducted throughout the lifecycle of the intervention.

Clearly Defined and Concrete Objectives

Related to the previous point, interventions at both the participating worker and intervention level need to have clearly defined and measurable objectives. At the participant level this means ensuring that each participant has clearly defined objectives that are attainable and measurable during and post-intervention. In terms of training, a best practice identified in the literature is using certificates, badges, and career ladders to make sure that the outcome of training is measurable both in terms of the client's perspective, but also in terms of his/her community and, most importantly, labour force outcomes. Similarly, the client's time commitment for training and support also needs to be well thought-out and clearly defined based on the specific needs of the individual. In terms of connection to the labour force, a further best practice is to ensure that there are strong ties to the local labour market; for example, using work placements, internships, or training resources that are directly applicable to local labour market opportunities.

In addition to the individual worker level, it is also critical that the intervention has clearly defined and measurable objectives. This is important for ensuring that project partners are well-placed to observe the impacts of their intervention as well as understand how the intervention can be improved in order to better achieve better outcomes for participants.

Integration of LES with Employment Services

The final area to consider is the need for, at a minimum, a high degree of coordination (if not integration) between LES interventions and local employment services. The literature review and focus groups indicated that LES interventions for displaced workers need to be placed directly in the context of the workers' employment related needs and goals. In some cases, LES related skills gaps are the area a worker will most need to improve in order to achieve employment goals. However, more often than not, employment related goals will be achieved only through the support of employment services such as job counseling, resume preparation, or technical skills or education upgrading. It is important that an intervention first define the needs of the worker, and then integrates an LES approach within the support that will best be able to address that need. Examples of such an integrated approach include: integrating writing and computer support for those workers needing help with resume writing; integrating LES support in certificate training; and using learning materials and activities that reflect the kinds of tasks that workers need to carry out in target occupations.

NEXT STEPS

The following are SRDC's recommendations for next steps in the development of the intervention beta tests:

- 1. Finalize the criteria for guiding the development of the intervention beta tests.**
This report provides an overview of the factors that are important to consider in terms of the development of the intervention beta test, with the literature review and interview/focus group reports providing more detailed examples. From this starting point, more specific criteria can be identified that will form the basis of selecting intervention beta test sites in BC and other provinces.
- 2. Analyze the Survey of Displaced Workers and report results to project partners.**
The survey was set to close in the middle of May. (The deadline has been extended in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.) The results will provide important insights into the needs of displaced workers in the 10 LOC communities in BC, and potentially other chosen sites in Canada.
- 3. Plan discussions among key stakeholders in each community.** This will provide LOCs with the opportunity to share results of the research—including the Survey of Displaced Workers—with their community and discuss potential opportunities for developing an intervention beta test based on a preliminary set of guidelines from the project team.
- 4. Develop guidance in terms of measuring the results of the intervention beta tests.**
Work with project partners to develop guidelines and best practices for ensuring that the intervention beta tests are designed with consideration to the measurement of key output and outcomes during the one-year pilot period. This will ensure that the interventions will be able to use evidence to adapt throughout the lifecycle of the project, while also demonstrating program and policy-relevant results at the end of the project.

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