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1 The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for equity between sexes and for all, including ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, people and children with disabilities, and indigenous groups and individuals. The SDG4 is very ambitious when it refers to lifelong learning, disregarding the level of economic development of countries around the world and colliding with the evidence that the very basic rights of all children – such as access, progression in the system, and completion of compulsory education while receiving quality of teaching – are still far from guaranteed.

2 The ideal framework for sustainable development should adopt the principles of a “life-course” approach, and focus on the early and cumulative nature of children’s success to guide the effective deployment of resources to support teaching and learning. The learning journey of children starts before birth, and prenatal and perinatal events can affect their developmental potential. Once born, children begin to accumulate their cognitive advantage; stimulated by social interactions, supported by nutritious food, and cared for by loving parents, the synapses of children’s brains multiply during a critical window, from zero to age three. The natural and the social environment shape the learning potential of toddlers; vocabulary also unlocks and expands, starting from 12 months.

3 The model of Educational Prosperity (Willms, 2018; Willms & Tramonte, 2014) offers an operational framework for monitoring and intervening in an educational system, assuring continuous support for children’s success. Success is the fullness of cognitive potential, strong learning, and emotional and physical health during the path of compulsory education. Educational Prosperity adopts the principles of the life course to
identify the critical stages and transitions in the early and later years of children’s life. It offers research-based evidence of the actions, interventions, and resources that social and educational institutions have to deploy in support of all children during their transitions to youth and adulthood.

4 In most countries, the abundance of data collected coexists with the lack of a holistic analytical approach; Educational Prosperity promotes the usage and harmonization of existing data collected by different agencies and sources, and guides the creation of indicators for targeted interventions and the allocation of resources. Key indicators and factors fit three criteria: they should be potent, pervasive, and proximal. A potent factor is causal and protective, like universal infant vaccination, which prevents and protects against chicken pox. A pervasive factor can affect several aspects of children’s success; for example, the creation of a health clinic in an isolated community improves the quality of life of women, their children, and the entire community, by promoting better health, but also new infrastructure, like roads and transportation. Finally, a proximal factor is close to outcomes, such as quality of teaching, which has a direct effect on learning, without other interfering factors.

5 Gender, poverty, ethnic or religious minority status, disability, as well as their intersections, determine access, progression, and attainment of education, interacting with changing family needs and strategies (Laugharn, 2007), and with the options and alternatives offered by the job market and the country’s economy (Rose and Al-Samarrai, 2001). The principal of equity must guide how countries and educational systems steer planning and service provision, ensuring that all students enter and stay in the system, and learn. This implies:

- intensively monitoring the initial stages of children’s development, particularly infant health and cognitive development, pre-literacy skills, and the inception of literacy skills in early primary school;
- identifying children by zones of exclusion and targeting the reduction and ultimately the elimination of all forms of exclusion;
- providing human and material resources that are adequate and distributed fairly, and supporting the most vulnerable environments and individuals first and most;
- creating school environments that are safe and inclusive for students;
- developing and updating pertinent and adequate curricula, delivered effectively in a context of optimal teaching and learning time;
- promoting effective teaching, where the metric of effectiveness lies in students’ learning and their achievement.

6 From birth to primary school is the time for the inception of pre-literacy skills, and all primary schoolteachers, in low-, middle-, and high-income countries alike, share the challenge to provide instruction at the appropriate level for children with a wide range of pre-literacy skills (Willms, 2009). Low and highly variable pre-literacy skills impair children’s progression ion their successful transition to school and eventually learning to read fluently and with confidence by the end of Grade 3. Grade-based formal curricula exacerbate the problem by exposing children to learn an inordinate number of skills in the first grade. International large-scale assessments, like the PIRLS study, for example, show that very few students in low- and middle-income countries reach the PIRLS intermediate benchmark when tested in Grade 4.

7 The literacy program Confident Learners (CL) was designed by Dr Willms and his research team to meet the needs of Indigenous students in Canada, who include First Nations,
Inuit, and Métis students. The program began with three literacy experts amassing and reviewing the curricula from all Canadian provinces, some US states, and from Australia and the UK, in order to describe the skills at a micro-level that are required to decode words and develop the language skills required to learn to read during the primary school years. The model resulted in 280 “coding” skills and 280 “language” skills, ordered sequentially, covering the period from school entry to the end of the primary stage. It is referred to as “The genome of reading development.” The distribution of the coding skills spiked at the beginning of Grade 1 and remained high through to the middle of Grade 2; thereafter, it fell precipitously. Most of the skills covered in the four-year period were to be taught from the beginning of Grade 1 through to the first half of Grade 2. This phenomenon was alluded to by the experts at Confident Learners as the “reading mountain,” and explained why children who started school with skills that are one or more years below the norm had very little chance of traversing the reading mountain and emerging as proficient readers by the end of Grade 2 or 3.

Confident Learners proposes an approach to instruction and assessment in line with Educational Prosperity, as it emphasizes children’s progress on the “pathway to literacy success.” It further applies a life-course approach at the micro-level of the reading process, showing how the complexity of the act of reading relies upon a combination of pre-literacy skills or precursors to literacy development. Also, the program embraces the “Simple View of Reading,” which maintains that successful reading acquisition depends upon two complementary components: code-related skills and language skills (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

Teachers working in the CL program shift the perception of their role, from teaching a grade-based curriculum to teaching the specific skills that children need to improve their literacy skills. Also, they adopt a “skills-based” approach instead of a “deficit approach,” ceasing to focus on children’s deficits and building from what children can do, using learning activities that enable them to move forward on the reading pathway. Teachers receive ongoing professional development, as well as support from the principal, a literacy lead in the school, parents, and the wider community.

The implementation of Confident Learners is in its early stages. After a program development project of three years, involving consultation, work, and the development of instruments and interventions with 32 First Nation communities around the country, currently 25 First Nation schools across Canada have adopted the Confident Learners program as the approach to teaching and learning. Children’s age ranges from 5 to 10. Most First Nations have very low levels of socioeconomic status; however, the level of school material resources, such as textbooks and school infrastructure, is comparable to Canadian standards. However, in nearly all communities, staff turnover is high, and most teachers do not have training in literacy instruction.

The program begins for children when they enter kindergarten and in most schools continues through to Grade 3 or 4. The program has proven to be successful for three reasons:

- it integrates a step-by-step approach to literacy instruction with a professional learning program for teachers that increases their knowledge of the the science of literacy skill development, assessment practices, and high-yield teaching strategies;
- it includes a bank of over 600 engaging learning activities, which are linked directly to the learning objectives on the Literacy Pathway and designed to support Indigenous language and culture;
• teachers can target instruction and monitor children’s progress on the literacy pathway with formative assessments as children acquire literacy skills.

A program based on skills acquisition and individual pathways of learning, such as CL, can face structural resistance, as it aims at reorienting the concept of teaching and learning to focus on individual pathways of learning while still operating within the traditional constraints and structures of a school system organized by grades. Teachers’ higher levels of education are not a guarantee of teaching effectiveness; moreover, raising the educational qualifications of teachers is a macro and long-term process. We have to work with the teachers that we have; and in the more extreme and deprived social and school environments, we may be fortunate to even find teachers willing to teach there. This is true everywhere. So, policies aimed at raising the level of education of teachers are deemed to fail in reaching the most vulnerable areas and students. The CL program works with the teachers available in the school, and trains them on the job, while they teach. Its activities and lesson toolkits are adapted with the local teachers to be geographically and culturally meaningful, to teachers and to students. One further challenge arises from effectively organizing teaching training and practices in remote areas, where resources are scarce. CL obtained great results by establishing teaching networks led by literacy experts, using communication technology, videos, and video conferences to connect teachers with each other and with the literacy coaches.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

The framework of Educational Prosperity (EP) assesses progression towards sustainable development; it does so by adopting an equity-based “life-course” approach focused on the early and cumulative nature of children’s success to guide the effective deployment of resources to support teaching and learning. Confident Learners’ instruction and assessment tools embed EP and concentrate on children’s progress on the “pathway to literacy success.” Reading acquisition depends upon code-related skills and language skills. Teachers shift their role, from teaching a grade-based curriculum to teaching the specific skills that children need to improve their literacy skills; they receive ongoing professional development from a literacy lead and from the broad school and social community.


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**Keywords:** educational reform, educational system, school scores, learning outcomes, literacy, reading education, information literacy

**Geographical index:** Canada, Amérique du Nord

**Mots-clés:** réforme de l’enseignement, système éducatif, résultat scolaire, résultats d’apprentissage, alphabétisation, apprentissage de la lecture, littératie

**Palabras claves:** reforma de la educación, sistema educativo, resultado escolar, resultados de aprendizaje, alfabetización, aprendizaje de la lectura, alfabetización informacional

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Lucia Tramonte is Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick (UNB). She develops and researches on existing large-scale international assessments, analysing inequalities and inequities associated with access to and transition in education. She designs new contextual assessments, like the PISA for Development (PISAD), where, with Dr. Willms, she creates the framework and questionnaires for the contextual assessment of 15 year olds of PISAD, an OECD initiative for low- and middle-income countries aimed at tracking international educational targets.
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