

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

Literacy in Canada Disparity Between Francophones and Anglophones A data analysis from the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey

Summary by

T. Scott Murray

What is this study about?

One of Canada's fundamental characteristics—its linguistic duality—was reflected in the IALS results by differences in literacy levels between the two main linguistic groups. Of course, comparisons between Anglophones and Francophones have always aroused interest and passion. Many factors—historical, political, economic and social—explain the similarities and differences between Francophones and Anglophones in Canada. Individuals' literacy skills are closely linked to their level of schooling. This study uses data from the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the 1989 Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) to explore the degree to which the large differences in literacy skill observed among anglophones and francophones can be explained by differences among the two groups.

What are the questions addressed by the study?

The study seeks to determine if the substantial gap in average literacy scores between Francophones and Anglophones can be explained by differences in their characteristics that are themselves related to literacy.

The study also explores whether these relationships differ by province, including whether living in a majority situation helps to reduce the size of the observed gap in performance.

Why is this study important?

The study is important because it confirms that the differences in literacy skill observed between Canada's Anglophone and francophone adults can be explained by differences in their demographic characteristics.

This finding leaves little room for other explanations, including the belief that linguistic discrimination accounts for the relatively poor performance of Canada's francophones.

Given the strong influence that literacy appears to exert on adult outcomes, public policies aimed at raising the average literacy levels of Canada's francophones might also serve to reduce linguistic inequality in employment and wages, access to post-secondary and adult learning systems and health.

What does the study conclude?

The level of schooling completed largely explains the disparities in literacy between the two main linguistic groups. Controlling for level of schooling—that is, examining mean literacy scores of Anglophones and Francophones who have attained the same level of schooling—the following figures (1, 2 and 3) clearly show the role that education plays in individuals' literacy skills.

Not only do skill levels rise as the number of years of schooling increases, but the gap between Francophones and Anglophones narrows considerably in the case of Francophones living outside Quebec, and it disappears completely in the case of Quebec Francophones.

The study documents the size of the literacy gaps between Anglophones and Francophones by gender, age, occupation and the level at which they use their skills.

Among the more striking findings are the size of the gap between the amount of reading undertaken by Anglophones and Francophones. In general, Anglophones reading intensity scores are higher than Francophones, both in daily life and in the context of a main job.

The analyses showed that substantial differences exist between Quebec Francophones (living in a majority situation) and Francophones outside Quebec (living in a minority situation).

However the gaps in average literacy scores between Quebec Francophones and Anglophones in Canada as a whole, disappear once one controls for the effect of key factors such as education, age, daily practices with respect to writing and numeracy, etc.

In short, disparities exist between Quebec Francophones and Anglophones in Canada as a whole, but they can be explained almost entirely by the variables present in the IALS database.

The situation is quite different with respect to New Brunswick Francophones. Even when all the variables that might explain the disparities between the two linguistic groups in that province are accounted for, a substantial portion of the gap remains.

Publication information

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