

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

Inequalities in Literacy Skills Among Youth in Canada and the United States

Summary by T. Scott Murray

What is this study about?

This study examines the level of literacy skills and social inequality in the distribution of literacy skill for young adults aged 16 to 25 in Canada and the United States.

As such it sheds light on the success of school systems in developing literacy and as a predictor of future economic success

What are the questions addressed by the study?

The report analyzes the extent to which literacy inequalities between youth from differ jurisdictions in Canada and the US can be attributed to differences in parental education levels, gender, immigrant status, and (in the US) ethnic group.

Why is this study important?

Employment projections for the coming decades predict weak demand for low-skilled workers and growing demand for moderately and high skilled workers. Literacy has been shown to be a key determinant of workers' productivity, a tool that helps them to apply their other skills for economic ends.

The analyses confirm the existence of large differences in literacy performance among jurisdictions, differences that suggest that some education systems are more efficient than others at producing literacy. This information should help decision makers focus their efforts to improve skill levels and to reduce social inequality in skill among graduates from differing social backgrounds.

Where they are successful in doing so tax payers will get a better return on their investments in education, the economy will be able to grow at a more rapid rate and inequalities in access to post-secondary education, adult education, employment and wage rates and health status should fall.

What does the study conclude?

Inequalities in the distribution of literacy skills of youth are considerably greater in

some countries than others. The analyses show that countries that achieve high levels of literacy skill do so by reducing differences in literacy skill among youth from differing social backgrounds.

The average literacy levels of Canadian and American youth are not as high as European youth.

On average Canadian youth scored one year of schooling higher than the average American 16 – 25 year old. This difference in performance disappears once the effect of differences in family background has been controlled for.

In Canada young women scored about one year of schooling higher than young men on the prose literacy test and one year lower on the quantitative literacy test.

In the US young women also outperformed young men on the prose test but did as well as young men on the quantitative literacy test.

Among youth who had high school or more women scored considerably higher than men, while young men did better among youth whose parents had less than high school.

Recent immigrant youth scored considerably lower on the literacy tests than those who were native born but the inequality in skill levels declined as the number of years spent in the country increased.

The level of literacy attained by youth varies considerably across provinces and states. The difference between the best and worst performing systems is equivalent to three years of schooling. Almost all of these differences in literacy skill is the result of differences among the young people themselves – in their age, gender, immigrant status and parental background.

Daily literacy activities serve to reduce the size of literacy inequalities among students from differing backgrounds. Higher levels of literacy use seem to allow student's from disadvantaged social backgrounds to realize higher scores.

Publication information

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