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## **Some Preliminary Comments on the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) Survey**

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Research Note

Statistics Canada, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the U. S. National Center for Education Statistics have recently released the new international Adult Literacy Lifeskills (ALL) survey of 16 to 65 year old adults in several countries which presents data indicating that the percentage of adults in the lowest level of literacy, Level 1 of the Prose scale in the United States decreased by 0.8 percent from 1995 to 2003. On the Document scale, the decline in the Level 1 adults was 3.2 percent. However, at the highest levels of literacy, Level 5, there was a decrease from 1995 to 2003 of 9.1 percent on the Prose scale and 5.0 percent on the Document scale. Thus the decline in high level literates was greater than that of the decrease in the least literate adults. This suggests some sort of regression to the mean, in which we have fewer low and high literates, and a growing number of moderately literate adults.

Interestingly, the ALL report gives data on the percentage of adults whose literacy skills match the needs of their jobs, are less than needed on the job (a skills deficit) or exceed the needs of the job (a literacy surplus). While the methodology for this work is questionable, the data reported indicate that the United States and some other countries are facing an overall literacy surplus, because the percentage of adults whose literacy skills match or exceed the use of those skills on the job exceeds the percentage of adults whose literacy skills are lower than their need on the job. In the U. S., using the average of the Prose and Document scale data, the percentage of adults with a skill deficit is 19.6 while the percentage with a literacy surplus is 21.15.

Interestingly, on the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) web site, under *Headline News*, the press release of the new ALL report addresses both this literacy surplus idea and the finding that skills seem to decline when they are not used. The *Headline News* article says,

"The study confirms the existence of significant skill loss in adult populations in several of the world's most economically advanced economies.

The IALS data provided hints that education did not "fix" skills for life. The fact that ALL confirms the existence of skill loss carries important implications for policy. First, it erodes the return on investments in education and learning, thereby creating large opportunity costs for economies and individuals. Second, it suggests that it is not enough to pay attention to policies and programs that foster increases in skill supply.

Public policy must also consider measures that serve to increase the social and economic demand for skill, particularly within jobs. In the absence of adequate levels

of demand additions to the supply of skill could evaporate almost as quickly as they are created."

The recommendation that "Public policy must also consider measures that serve to increase the social and economic demand for skill..." would seem, to me, to run counter to the work of many who seek to use "plain language" to reduce the demands for literacy skills by increasing the usability and readability of important materials, such as used in health care, job performance, legal proceedings, government documents and other materials.

It appears to be suggesting that governments need to work to reduce literacy surpluses and losses of literacy though disuse by somehow increasing the demand for higher skills and then turn around and provide funds and other resources to support programs to increase people's skills to meet the new demands. There is something about this that seems wrong- headed to me.

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