

Adult's Perceived Literacy Near Universal in US, Canada, and UK

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The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) developed performance tasks for prose, document and quantitative scales that were used to assign adults to five literacy levels (Level 1-low to Level 5-high literacy). Additionally, the IALS developed a scale for the adult's self-assessment of their literacy ability including rating categories of poor, moderate, good, excellent (and no response).

Using the document performance tasks, 23.7 percent of United States adults ages 16-65 were assigned to literacy level 1, the lowest level of literacy, while in Canada the percentage assigned to document literacy Level 1 was 18.2, and in the United Kingdom 23.3 percent of adults were assigned to document literacy Level 1. Similar percentages, with a little variation, held for the prose and quantitative literacy scales and the assignment of adults to Literacy Level 1 on those scales.

Using the performance scales then, about one fifth of adults aged 16-65 in these three countries were considered to be "at risk" for social inclusiveness due to poor literacy. This would come to about 32 million adults in the US, 3.3 million in Canada, and 7 million in the UK.

However, using the adult's self-assessments of their reading abilities for work and daily life, grouped by the document scale, fewer than 5 percent of adults in either the US or Canada rated their reading as poor (no self-assessment data were found in the IALS for the UK, but for five other nations in the first report of the IALS data, fewer than 5 percent of adults aged 16-65 rated their reading skills for daily life or work poor, hence it is likely that in the UK, too, fewer than 5 percent of adults would have rated their reading skills as poor). Using a 5 percent estimate for these three nations, some 8 million adults in the US, less than 1 million in Canada, and fewer than 2 million in the UK would be considered "at risk" of social exclusion at work, home or in community activities for poor reading. Similar findings held for self-assessments of writing and numeracy and with self-assessments grouped by the prose and quantitative scales.

Using the foregoing self-perceived estimates of reading ability, there appears to be a considerable discrepancy between the performance test and the self-assessments in determining the percentages and numbers of adults "at risk" of social exclusion due to poor literacy in these three nations. These differences may account, to at least some extent, for the finding in all three nations that many fewer adults enroll in literacy programs than might be expected on the basis of their numbers as determined by the performance tests.

If it is adult's self-perceived need for literacy education that determines whether or not they will enroll in literacy programs, then it might be useful in national assessments of adult literacy to delve further into adult's self-perceptions, what explains their self-perceptions, what information would help them better assess their literacy skills, and to provide respondents who assess themselves as poor in literacy with information about how they might locate adult literacy programs. It might also be useful to determine other education needs or desires than literacy or numeracy so that the adult education and literacy provision systems in these and other nations might better align themselves with a broader array of adult educational needs.

As it stands now, it seems that literacy is almost universally perceived as moderately to excellently developed by the adults in these Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations. It should not be surprising, then, that so few adults enroll in literacy programs. They think they are already literate enough for their daily and work needs - and perhaps they are.