

Where does the reading problem go when children grow up?

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If America's public schools aren't doing a good job of teaching reading, you wouldn't know it by asking adults how well they read. That's because the overwhelming majority of our nation's adults 16-59 years of age think they read Well or Very Well.

Reading President Bush's strategic plan for education in the United States, one might get the impression that we need to spend billions of dollars more on teaching children to read better because the United States faces a serious reading problem with millions of children who will grow up to become adults with poor reading abilities.

This impression is constantly being reinforced by various national and international surveys in which the reading skills of youth and adults are assessed using standardized tests. Based on a set of more or less arbitrary rules, test developers typically create reading or literacy "levels" on these standardized tests and then end up declaring millions of adults as of "low literacy" or just "mediocre" compared to those in other industrialized nations. Such data are then used by education advocates, or by policy makers such as the President of the United States, to call for increases in educational funding to increase the reading skills of America's children so that when they grow up the nation will have an adult population with better reading abilities.

Adult's Perceptions of Their Reading Skills

But it is one thing to use standardized tests to judge the reading skills of adults and still another to ask those same adults how well they read the English language. The question is, do the nation's adults think they have a reading problem?

The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) asked adults to rate their own reading skills as they perceived them. In a report on the Literacy of Older Adults in America, from the National Center for Education Statistics in Washington, DC, November 1996, the authors reported (p. 43) that adults aged 16 to 59 rated themselves as reading Very Well-72%, Well-22% and Not Well/Not At All-7%. Overall, then, some 93% of adults in this age range rated themselves as reading Well or Very Well.

When broken out by ethnic groups, ratings were found of

- Whites: Very Well-77%, Well-21%, or Not Well/Not At All-3%.
- Blacks: Very Well-67%, Well-27% and Not Well/Not At All-6%.
- Hispanics: Very Well-46%, Well-22% and Not Well/Not At All-32%

In this analysis, only Hispanics reported a high percentage, 32 percent, or 5.3 million adults, who thought they could not read English Well or Very Well, no doubt reflecting the large immigrant population in this category with less education and poorer English language skills than U. S. born adults. Among both Blacks and Whites, poor reading appears to be a perceived problem for only 3 to 6 percent of these populations, about 4.5 million adults in the age range 16-59.

International Comparisons

Another way that has been tried to find out if the U.S. has an adult reading problem that needs to be addressed is to take 20 of the highest income, richest nations on earth, give the adults a literacy test, and then find out how well the U.S. does. If the average for adults in the U.S. falls well below the average for these nations then this might indicate a significant degree of reading problems. If the U.S. is as good as or better than the average of these developed, high income nations, then that might suggest that the U.S. does not have a reading problem of crisis proportions.

In an Educational Testing Service report entitled "The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality. Literacy in the U.S. from an International Perspective", released February 2002, the authors used data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and did the comparisons listed above. They reported that, for a composite score made up of the IALS Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy scales combined, the U. S. scored 2 points above the average composite score for 20 of the richest nations on earth and ranked number 12 out of 20 on the composite score. Comparing U. S. men and women separately to 17 high income nations the men were not different from the 17 nation average and ranked 12 out of 17, while the U.S. women scored 5 points above the 17 nation average and ranked 9th in average literacy among these high income, industrialized nations.

Even more telling is the finding that on the Prose literacy scale, at the 50th percentile the average U. S. adult literacy score ranked number 8 out of 21 high income nations, while at the 70th and 80th percentiles it ranked number 4 and at the 85th and 90th percentiles it ranked number 3. Similar shifts toward the higher rankings at the higher percentiles were found with the Document and Quantitative literacy scales, though not so dramatic.

At the lower percentile levels, the U.S. adults tended to score somewhat below the average scores of the 21 nations on the three literacy scales, though typically the U. S. scores were not statistically significantly different from the average scores for other nations at points below the 50th percentile on the three scales. The U. S. rankings below the 50th percentile ranged from 12th to 19th out of 21 at the low end of the percentile distribution.

Further, as measured by a composite of the Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy scales on the IALS, at the higher levels of literacy, that is the 80th, 85th, and 90th percentiles the U. S. is in the top 3 to 5 ranks of 17 industrialized nations in terms of adult literacy proficiency. So while we're not winning any gold medals, we get a few bronze medals for third place in the Olympics of adult literacy among the most highly developed, wealthiest nations on earth.

Cultural niches for literacy

As indicated above, using their own judgments of their reading abilities, over 93 percent of America's adults do not think they have a reading problem. Using comparisons of average scores on the standardized tests of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the U. S. is on par with most of the industrialized, knowledge-based, highest income nations on earth. This is like being an average or "mediocre" athlete in the small pool of world athletes who qualify for the Olympics. Further, if the "gold" is power and wealth that these nations are vying for, the U. S. already ranks as the most powerful and richest nation on earth. It would seem to be a hard sell to use these data to plea for more money for teaching adults to read better.

Perhaps when children grow up and get out in the post-K-12 world they adapt to the

ambient literacy demands of a cultural niche that they find possible to occupy. They find jobs they can qualify for, they get information from sources they have access to and feel comfortable in using, and as they slip ever more firmly into their literacy niche, they feel more and more satisfaction with their literacy skills. Perhaps this is why so many U.S. adults think they read Well or Very Well.

In turn, this may be one reason so few adults show up in adult literacy programs and why such programs have come to serve more and more those adults who are not native English speakers and did not progress through the U. S. schools as poor readers. As indicated above, more Hispanics perceive themselves to be lacking in reading English, and so it is not too surprising that Hispanics and other non-English speaking immigrants show up in larger numbers for adult English language and literacy programs. It seems likely that many immigrants are actively seeking to find a cultural niche in the U. S. in which they feel they can meet some of their most pressing needs.

The concept of the cultural niche can be expanded into the idea of broader sub-cultures with differing perceptions of their literacy abilities. For instance, when the average proficiencies of Whites and Blacks on the NALS Prose scale were compared, it was found that for Whites who rated themselves as reading Very Well, their average Prose proficiency was 308, well into Literacy Level 3, whereas for Blacks rating themselves as reading Very Well, their Prose average proficiency was 259, in the middle of NALS Literacy Level 2. On the Quantitative scale, Whites rating themselves as reading Well scored 278 on the NALS , placing them just inside Level 3, while Blacks who rated themselves as reading Well scored 221, at the high end of Level 1, the lowest literacy level on the NALS.

This indicates that two sub-cultural groups may both rate themselves as equally competent in terms of their self-perceived reading abilities, even though their measured competence may differ as much as a full standard deviation on standardized literacy tests. This suggests an adaptive function within each sub-cultural group to the ambient literacy abilities and demands of each sub-group as its members encounter and perceive them.

It would seem to be a useful activity to find out more about these cultural and sub-cultural phenomena with regard to the differences between adults' measured literacy abilities and their self-perceptions of their literacy abilities, and to use this information to better understand the scale of need and desire for adults to participate in the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States.
