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New Poll Indicates Canada Meets Acceptable Goal for Adult Literacy

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A new national poll by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) indicates that Canadians think that it would be acceptable if 80% of adults could meet most everyday reading requirements. Further, the poll suggests that adults also think they have met that goal.

Here is the summary statement about the results of a question about reading from the news release of findings of the Canadian Council on Learning's Public Poll on Learning:

"About 58% of Canadian adults can meet most everyday reading requirements. Canadians feel that 80% of adults meeting most everyday reading requirements would be an acceptable level."

Now here is the question on which the foregoing statement of results is based:

"In Canada, about 42% of adults could not meet most everyday reading requirements. Is this situation acceptable?

Yes
No (If no go to question below:)

Recognizing that no country is ever likely to be perfect in any area, what would be an acceptable score?"

Notice that in the actual poll question the respondent is given the information that "about 42% of adults could not meet most everyday reading requirements." Conversely, then, 58% of Canadian adults can meet most everyday reading requirements as stated in the results to the question.

In the survey questionnaire there is no data source cited to support the statement that 42 percent of Canadian adults could not meet everyday reading requirements, but the 42% number looks like the data for the percentage of adults reading in Levels 1 and 2 in the Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) survey reported in 2005.

The methodology used by the ALL survey was questioned by the United States National Academy of Sciences in 2005 and the idea that adults scoring below Level 3 lack the literacy skills for meeting everyday reading requirements was said to have no basis in empirical fact. Furthermore, the ALL survey report itself presented data indicating that 80% of adults in the workforce had reading skills that matched or exceeded their job requirements. Also, in the earlier International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) of the mid-1990s, some 95% of adults said their reading skills met their daily needs moderately, good, or excellently. These data suggest that adults in Canada thought they have met the 80% acceptable standard for reading stated in the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) poll.

In fact, the CCL poll itself presents data confirming the idea that Canadian adults think they have reached the 80% standard in most basic skills, including reading. The CCL poll indicated that 90% of Canadians agreed that they have learned what they need to work and live well with others, 88% agreed that they have learned what they need to think critically

and formulate new ideas, 81% agreed that they have learned what they need to enjoy their life, and 76% agreed that they have learned what they need to succeed in their career.

Clearly, then, based on the data for self-reports of reading in the IALS of the 1990s, the data showing that Canadian adults possessed reading skills that matched or exceeded their job demands of the ALL of 2003, and now the new CCL poll of 2006 which shows that up to 90% of Canadian adults believe they have learned what they need to work and live well with others, and this presumably includes literacy and numeracy, there is cause to celebrate the educational and skills achievement of Canada's adult population.

Still, the data from the adult literacy surveys and the CCL poll suggest that some 5% to 20% (some 1 to 4 million) of adults in Canada may face considerable difficulties in coping with the basic skills demands that they encounter in their daily lives and in the world of work. The need is particularly pressing among the indigenous populations and immigrants.

So while Canadians can take pride in achieving their stated goal of 80% of adults with the education and learning they need, there is a continuing need for concerted action across Canada to meet the basic skills demands of millions of adults who too often are existing on the margins of society.

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