



Response to Literacies Special Bulletin

Literacies recently issued a critique of Learning Literacy in Canada: Evidence from the International Survey of Reading Skills (Statistics Canada) and Reading the Future (Canadian Council on Learning). CCL would like to respond to a number of the statements made in that critique, focusing primarily on those related to Reading the Future.

As background, Reading the Future is the first report of its kind in Canada, providing a detailed analysis of the characteristics of Canadians with low levels of literacy, projections of literacy levels through to 2031, and an overview of effective approaches to adult literacy, based on consultations with expert practitioners.

CCL believes that strengthening literacy levels across Canada is crucial to improving quality of life, and reports such as Reading the Future contribute to the dialogue on literacy in our country.

Below is our response to some of the issues raised in the Literacies critique.

Issue: The Statistics Canada and CCL reports group people differently.

The reports group people differently because they are two separate reports using the same source data. The differences in grouping are a function of the analytic intent of the reports and are not misinterpretations of the underlying data. The method employed to group individuals in the two reports is the same, however, the Statistics Canada report focuses only on the working-aged population, whereas CCL's report included the entire population aged 16 and over. CCL's choice reflects the authors' beliefs that adults over age 65 represent an important segment of the population, and that literacy has a major impact on overall quality of life— not just on employability.

Issue: The ISRS tests do not measure reading.

It is true that the ISRS tests do not measure reading. However, the ISRS sample was selected from adults who had already participated in the IALSS study. IALSS provides perhaps the most valid, reliable, comparable and interpretable assessment of adults' reading abilities that science can currently provide. The ISRS provides data on a set of component skills without which it is practically impossible to reach literacy Level 3 skills.

Issue: Reading the Future advocates a skills-based approach to instruction.

Reading the Future does not advocate a skills-based approach to instruction. What it does do is flag the fact that many adults lack skills in the mechanics of reading—a factor that must be taken into account in the design and delivery of literacy programs.

Issue: Some tests are normed against children although many ISRS participants are over 24.

First, the theory underlying the clinical reading tests used in the ISRS study applies equally to both children and adults. However, as noted in Reading the Future, the task of improving adults' reading levels is more complex because of competing demands on their time, their prior life experience, and their own interests and needs. Second, both the ISRS and the IALSS provide estimates that are statistically representative of the sampled population, and have used sample sizes that are far larger than those normally used to establish norms in clinical tests. The resulting data thus provide their own norms.

Issue: The reports ignore what we know about adult literacy learning.

Reading the Future provides a nuanced profile of the characteristics of different groups of adult learners, information that is critical to tailoring literacy programs to learner needs and circumstances. In no way does the report suggest that practitioners use a single approach to instruction. In fact, the report clearly states that “the proposed interventions are meant to be indicative rather than definitive” suggestions for meeting many of the learning needs and characteristics of each of the groups identified in Reading the Future.

The report also clearly states that “above all else, program offerings for improving literacy need to be flexible, accessible and affordable,” that “technology would have to be introduced very carefully, and with a good deal of support for program participants,” and that learners “require a range of supports as they work to improve their literacy skills” including access to financial support, daycare, and counseling.

Issue: The reports suggest time limits for learning.

The reports do no such thing. What the reports do provide are estimates of the average number of hours of instructor-led training that experts believe adults in each group would need to reach Level 3. Page 46 of Reading the Future clearly indicates that the averages are indicative of the effort required, and do not represent definitive timelines: “the learning needs of individual adults will vary considerably depending on their personal circumstances and prior life experiences.”

In addition, neither report suggests policy that would serve, as Literacies states, to “train the best and forget the rest.” In sharp contrast, the primary goal of the analyses in both reports is to show that the Canadian literacy “market” is composed of several distinct groups of learners, each with its own learning needs and characteristics. Ensuring that programs are designed to respond to all the varying needs is critical to their success. We believe that the data provided will help individuals, employers, governments and literacy practitioners develop more effective approaches for all types of learners.

Issue: The reports oversimplify issues of English and mother-tongue literacy.

We respectfully disagree with this contention. Reading the Future shows that currently only 14% of adults below Level 3 are immigrants. Nonetheless, many newcomers to Canada need language and/or literacy support. The ISRS data and Reading the Future represent the first time one can look simultaneously at immigration, educational attainment, mother tongue and oral language proficiency. Knowing whether one is dealing with a language issue as well as a literacy issue is again critical information for the design of efficient and effective literacy programs.

The projections of future literacy levels do show, however, that both the absolute numbers and proportions of adults with literacy skills below Level 3 will remain virtually unchanged through 2031. Skills loss, aging and immigration are all factors. Unless we address each of these factors, the literacy “problem” will be with us for decades to come. Literacy practitioners, organizations and learners can use the numbers and percentages for each learner group as information to advocate for policy and program changes to meet their needs.

The importance of a dialogue on literacy

We encourage readers to use the evidence presented in the reports to reflect upon what the data say about literacy in Canada. Individuals can use the data to consider their own learning needs in a rapidly changing society. Employers can assess the contribution that literacy upgrading could make to the productivity growth upon which their competitiveness depends. Governments can use the information to determine the amount and types of investments they should make in adult literacy. And literacy organizations can reflect on whether their current programs and services are well suited to the needs of their respective target groups.

Reading the Future is available on the Canadian Council on Learning’s website: www.ccl-cca.ca.

If you have any questions regarding Reading the Future, please contact Nadine Valk at nvalk@ccl-cca.ca.