

IALSS 2003: update from Statistics Canada

The second round of the IALS survey happened earlier this year. We interviewed Jean Pignal, Chief of the Literacy Section at the Special Surveys Division of Statistics Canada, by e-mail. Below are his responses. Jean will also be joining us on the listserv discussion (see page 11) to address questions about how the IALSS works.

We understand that the report from the new IALS – ALL – is due out in early 2004. What will be reported?

The name of the Canadian survey is the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). While this is known internationally as the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL), Canada preferred to keep the IALS cachet and recognition. The first scheduled report will examine the measured skill domains and their distribution across the participating countries. Very little sub-national analysis will be included in this report. Its flavour will very much be like the 1994 publication *Literacy, Economy and Society: Results of the first International Adult Literacy Survey*.

The results will be ready by the spring, but the first international report won't be ready until the fall or winter of 2004. National results will be available in September 2005, as will a series of provincial, territorial and sub-population reports. We should also have a public use Microdata file ready by then.

Another update for the IALS will be an interactive web site. It allows people to develop their own tables using the IALS data.

I have looked at the Educational Testing Service (ETS) web site (www.ets.org/all/) and read the frameworks. I understand that the ALL will measure teamwork and analytical problem-solving. Why did you include these tests?

After piloting the instruments in 2001/02, we found that the teamwork framework was not successful as a psychometric measure, nor could we use it to produce valid and reliable scales. We did manage to produce a problem solving test which measured analytical reasoning through a series of scenarios. The reasons for expanding our focus was simple – while literacy and numeracy are basic skills that have impacts on individual well-being and socio-economic success, other skills must also be

considered if we are to better understand the impact of skills on our labour market and social fabric. The development of these test and measures can only be related by following a long road. In 1998, we began to develop and conceive of the theoretical frameworks and the framework and items were finally chosen in 2002 – four years of trial and error, but the domains that have been measured will undoubtedly add to our understanding of skills distribution in Canada.

I have also heard that, in Canada, the ALL will look at some specific communities more in depth or separately from the general population.

The ALL framework requires each country to field a sample of respondents aged sixteen and sixty-five. In Canada, the IALSS obtains this sample and

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is part of a continuing tradition of attempts to measure literacy levels in the adult population by means of surveys and to produce international comparisons. Such research is driven by the search for universals in the relationship between literacy, education and prosperity, which can be used to further the goal of global development.

The IALS draws on a particular discipline – the psychometric measurement tradition. It uses an information processing model of literacy and attempts to identify levels of literacy skill that are independent of the context of use – the literacy counterpart of the generic and transferable labour skills supposedly possessed by the flexible worker...

The IALS Surveys... are re-defining literacy to fit in with the projected needs of an ideal, consumer-oriented citizen who is responsive to multiple new contexts for literacy use. They justify a vision of what literacy should be, rather than being based on people's lived experiences. This is an institutional vision that has little to do with supporting people to use and control literacy for their own purposes. It privileges some literacies and deletes other, vernacular practices and then presents its findings as the 'truth' about literacy.

excerpt from "Privileged Literacies: Policy, Institutional Process and the Life of the IALS" by Mary Hamilton, Language and Education, 2001, Vol. 15, Nos. 2 & 3, pp178-196.

supplements it with a sample of individuals over sixty-five (seniors). Moreover, Aboriginal respondents living off reserve were sampled in urban areas of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as well as the three territories. We also had an augmented sample for immigrants (recent and established), linguistic minorities (in New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba) and youth (British Columbia and Quebec).

Some discussions have taken place regarding on-reserve aboriginal and in-prison samples (to the point where estimates have been made and reports written on approximate costs and methodologies for these two sub-populations), but funding has yet to materialize.

If so, what are those communities and how/why were they chosen?

The IALSS samples were taken from the Census. We randomly chose households with a high probability of containing a respondent with the desired demographics (i.e. sixteen and older for the base sample, or with the added constraint of having to be of aboriginal descent, or of a linguistic minority (French in Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick, English in Quebec), or screened on some other demographic criteria). Thus we had a sample of randomly chosen households that could then be screened at the door by the interviewer to see if anyone in the household fulfilled the conditions imposed for inclusion in the required IALSS samples. From this list of eligible residents, a person was then randomly chosen as a respondent. We currently have over 23,000 respondents from across Canada with sufficient numbers in every targeted sub-population to produce reliable estimates of proficiency in the four measured Domains (Prose Literacy, Document Literacy, Numeracy and Problem Solving).

Why did Canada choose to look at seniors and immigrants?

While adult literacy may be a factor in the workplace, it is also a quality of life issue. In order to provide proficiency estimates for the entire Canadian adult population, we needed to supplement the sample with older Canadians. This sample will also be comparable with the 1994 IALS allowing us, in a limited manner, to track change in the profiles across Canada.

Why do certain provinces have different augmented samples?

As with our Federal partners, each Province and Territory was given the opportunity to enrich their

sample. This offer was taken up by every province except New Brunswick (which nevertheless received an augmented sample of Francophones through the federally funded linguistic minority sample) and Prince Edward Island (which was allocated 650 responses in the base sample). In addition, all three territorial governments funded a northern sample. ■

IALS Methodology and Validity

In the IALS, the performance scales and the self-assessments represent two fundamentally different approaches to assessing literacy abilities. In the performance assessments, literacy is construed as a cognitive ability (latent trait) that makes possible the use of printed materials in various contexts. It is considered that some people have more of this capacity than others, although how much people have or lack may not be consciously apparent to them. Nonetheless, it is assumed that these differences in the amount of capacity can be inferred using people's performance on various real-world tasks that incorporate the latent trait that is theorized to make possible each person's performance.

In the self-assessment approach to assessing literacy, literacy is considered as an ability or set of abilities (as in reading, writing, and numeracy in the IALS) that adults are consciously aware of and can perceive well enough to estimate how well their literacy skills permit them to negotiate the literacy demands of different sets of activities at work or in their daily life. This requires that adults are aware both of the demands for literacy in the different contexts that they encounter and of how well their literacy abilities permit them to meet these demands on a recurrent basis.

Clearly, these two different approaches to assessing literacy are based on different implicit theories about literacy and different procedures for measuring literacy. It is also evident from the discrepancies in data that these approaches produce different estimates of how many adults are at risk because of literacy in the various nations that participated in the IALS. These findings raise serious questions about the validity of the different assessments. Is each assessment equally valid as a means of representing the literacy abilities of the adult population? If so, then how should the different results of each method be used?

reprinted with permission from "The International Adult Literacy Survey: How well does it represent the literacy abilities of adults?" by Thomas G. Sticht, *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, Vol. 15, No. 2 November, 2001, pp19-36.