

Why numbers?

An interview with Susan Sussman

by **Tracy Westell**

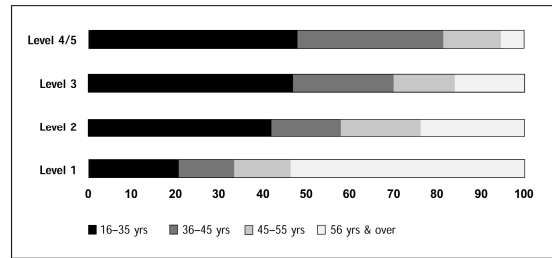
Susan Sussman is a dynamic, bright, opinionated person who is a delight to talk to. She has been involved in literacy in Ontario since 1993. She has seen a lot of changes since then but her self-described 'hyper-rationality' drew her to one document that has changed the face of literacy policy-making in this country (and many other western countries): the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).

In my recent discussion with Sussman, I explored what she found most interesting about the IALS stats. She looked at who makes up the 22 per cent of Canadians at IALS Level One, and the 26 per cent who make up Level Two. She discovered that those in Level One were mostly people whose first language was neither English nor French, and people over fifty-five. Up until her work, this breakdown had not been common knowledge. She also discovered that the demographic profile of the Level One group is very different from that of the Level Two group.

Sussman points out that the statistics have been used to support literacy as a major labour force development issue. She suggests that in much of Canada, second-language learners and older Canadians in Level One have not been served well by IALS and, consequently, by the recent literacy policies. A large proportion of Level One learners are not served by policies because they are older and employment is not necessarily a priority for them. Another group is often excluded because they are not literate in their second language, and literacy is considered separate from English/French as a Second Language.

Sussman is less concerned with the statistical revelations than she is with the conundrum that the stats put literacy advocates into. Sussman says IALS has catapulted literacy into a major policy priority for western governments. Policy-makers want to see the literacy rates in Canada shift. And, she says, literacy advocates "refer to the data because it makes the

Composition Prose Literacy Groups Levels 1 and 2 by Age



literacy situation look bad." Meanwhile, Level One learners who need the most help and have the most difficulty learning often receive the least amount of instruction from the least qualified instructors. Many programs are not designed to attract learners who fit the Level One demographic profile; thus literacy rate statistics show little or no improvements.

We need studies like IALS to keep the funding dollars coming. We also need to make progress to prove that we are worth funding. Sussman is emphatic when she says, "To satisfy policy-makers, we must quantify the progress people are making." Yet the measurement of levels and changes in levels is not yet refined enough to capture the progress being made by literacy learners.

Sussman says, "What I didn't expect was to find just how problematic **any** measure of literacy is." Sussman says the main challenge with any survey of this kind is validity – in other words, is the test a true measure of what people can do in the real world.

Many critics have concerns that the conditions and content of the test are not 'real world' and therefore the results are not 'real'. She points out that the IALS test requires that people have an 80 per cent probability of responding correctly to questions at a given literacy level, in order to count as fitting into that literacy level. One of the designers of the test, according to Sussman, has said that a more realistic 'pass' rate would be 50 per cent. At this cut-off, far fewer people would be in the two lowest levels, and we would infer much higher literacy rates.

Sussman believes that we need statistics to get in politicians' doors. Once we have their ears, the individual story is what they want to hear. However, Sussman has some real concerns about the 22 per cent of Canadians at Level One who are not being served by the human capital emphasis in current literacy policy-making. For all of us, one question remains: How do we use the statistics responsibly to get the services where they are needed? ■

Composition of Prose Literacy Groups by First Language

