

Adult literacy in Canada: A few views

In October 2008, *Literacies* published a special issue of our *Bulletin* to let readers know about two reports that could inform education policy decisions in Canada. The two reports are *Learning Literacy in Canada: Evidence from the International Survey of Reading Skills* and *Reading the Future*.

The special Bulletin is available online at
http://www.literacyjournal.ca/literacies/Bulletins/reading_the_reports.pdf

The following papers provide more in-depth discussion of our concerns with the two reports. This document includes:

The International Survey of Reading Skills: A Closer Look at the Reading Tests
by Dr. Pat Campbell

Tests, Teaching and Policy: Comments on a Survey of Reading Skills
by Dr. Richard Darville

On Reading the Future and Xenophobia
by Dr. Nancy Jackson

Why Policy Can't Afford to Ignore What Practitioners Know
by Tannis Atkinson

What conversations have you been having about these reports? *Literacies* is eager to know your thoughts, ideas and questions. Please contact us at journal@literacy.ca.

This paper available online at
http://www.literacyjournal.ca/literacies/Bulletins/a_few_views.pdf

The International Survey of Reading Skills: A Closer Look at the Reading Tests

by Dr. Pat Campbell

In January 2008, Statistics Canada published a report titled *Learning Literacy in Canada: Evidence from the International Survey of Reading Skills*. The main purpose of the report was to identify reading profiles and abilities of Canada's least-skilled adult readers, using data from the *International Survey of Reading Skills* (ISRS). The report's goal was to "supply policy makers, researchers and practitioners with new information useful for making decisions about how to plan and deliver appropriate and efficient reading instruction for different adult learners" (Grenier et al., 2008, p. 19). In July 2008, the Canadian Council on Learning published *Reading the Future: Planning to meet Canada's future literacy needs*. This report provides program recommendations, practices, and strategies for improving the skills of low-skilled readers that were identified by the ISRS.

The ISRS was designed to identify the reading profiles and learning needs of Canadian adults at IALSS Levels 1 and 2. The ISRS assessed 1,815 Canadian adults, using a battery of six clinical reading tests that measured different components of reading. The survey revealed the existence of four distinct groups of "low-skilled" readers. The six clinical reading tests did not require the individuals to actually read a passage or a document. This raises a key question, "If the ISRS did not require individuals to actually read and construct meaning from text, how can the survey inform literacy programming and reading instruction?"

An assessment battery should be appropriate for and compatible with the purpose and context of the assessment. If the goal of the ISRS was to inform program delivery, then its assessment tools should have been aligned with the theories and practices that permeate the Canadian adult basic educational system. Moreover, the ISRS assessment battery should have reflected the complex nature of reading and included a range of *contextualized* literacy tasks.

Most Canadian educators embrace the interactive and/or social constructive theories of reading, both of which view reading as the active construction of meaning from text. Since reading assessments reflect reading theories and definitions, one would expect that, at the very least, the ISRS tools measured how a person constructs meaning from text. Yet, the ISRS tests did not measure comprehension; rather, the six tests were concerned with a person's ability to repeat digits, pronounce the names of letters, read sight words and nonsense words, spell words, and understand the meaning of words (Grenier et al., 2008, p. 42). I find it shocking that *Reading the Future* provides program recommendations and strategies for literacy students, based on an assessment battery that *did not* assess an individual's ability to read and comprehend text.

The ISRS authors state that they used tests that displayed "good psychometric properties in terms of their validity, reliability and comparability" (p. 23). Yet, two tests (TOWRE

and Rapid Automatic Naming) are normed against adolescents and young adults although many participants in the ISRS study are over the age of 24. Further, the study's participants were not assessed in an environment that provided optimum conditions for obtaining data. For example, four tests (RAN, TOWRE, PhonePass and Digit-Span tests) were recorded over the telephone. This type of administration does not maximize the validity and/or consistency of the data. How can a parent concentrate on repeating digits when his/her children are probably competing for his/her attention? In fact, the ISRS administration process goes against the *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* (1993).

In order to inform instruction, reading assessments need to align with reading definitions and classroom practice. The ISRS tests are inappropriate on both counts. One cannot draw instructional implications from tests that do not reflect the reading process. For example, word recognition involves three language-cueing systems (graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic). Yet the ISRS tests focused on the graphophonic system. The ISRS tests overlooked the complex nature of reading; instead, the tests viewed reading as a discrete skill—namely phonics. The *Reading the Future* report, which analyzed and interpreted the ISRS data, suggests that literacy programs concentrate on teaching “print skills first,” rather than emphasizing and reinforcing the use of knowledge to identify words and construct meaning. While “structured language” approaches are important, the goal of an effective literacy program is to help readers integrate reading strategies rather than to rely excessively on any one strategy.

The ISRS resulted in *Reading the Future*, a report that outlines recommendations that have three implications for adult literacy practice. First, the report advocates a national certification program on “Effective Instruction of Essential Skills.” Second, the report advocates that programs use specific assessment tools (TOWES, PDQ, Woodcock-Johnson) to identify students’ literacy levels. Third, the report advocates a skill-based instructional program that emphasizes print skills. The report fails to recognize three facts. First, provincial and territorial governments, literacy coalitions, and educators have developed and are developing certified training programs for educators. Second, according to a national survey of assessment practices, Canadian educators use 26 different types of commercial instruments to assess literacy, numeracy, and essential skills assessment to inform instruction (Campbell, 2007). This raises the question, “Why does *Reading the Future* recommend only three specific assessments?” Third, Canadian educators realize the limitations of a skill-based instructional program. Educators view learning through a broad angle lens and advocate for a holistic instructional program that is grounded in social practices theory. As educators, we must be wary of surveys, such as the ISRS, that have powerful political and professional implications.

Canadian educators bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the adult literacy movement. A deep understanding of literacy requires praxis, a cyclical process that unifies theory and practice. Let’s continue to be guided by praxis, rather than statistics.

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Tests, Teaching and Policy: Comments on a Survey of Reading Skills

by Dr. Richard Darville

Learning Literacy in Canada: Evidence from the International Survey of Reading Skills (ISRS) studied people previously tested at IALSS levels 1 and 2, to clarify what limits of ability kept them below level 3, and to identify relevant life characteristics. The analysis was somewhat extended in *Reading the Future: Planning to Meet Canada's Future Literacy Needs* (RTF). Both reports emphasized policy and teaching “implications,” and RTF includes programming suggestions from a rather partial “expert panel” (a few workplace educators and psychologically-oriented reading researchers). In this brief comment on ISRS and RTF, I try to (i) say, in a nutshell and without citing statistics, what the studies found (about those tested in English); (ii) compare this to what literacy workers often already know – what it adds and what it obscures; (iii) discuss the policy and teaching proposals developed in the studies, some beneficial and some potentially damaging.

The testing focused on what ISRS calls (following a heavily promoted American agenda for reading research) “components of reading,” two in particular. Word-decoding was tested by having people read lists of words and “pseudo-words” – a conventional testing device to insure that people don’t use text meaning or sentence patterns to help identify words. Vocabulary was tested using an adaptation of a venerable test that asks people to match words said aloud to the best of four pictures. Scores on such tests were extensively analyzed, and compared to IALSS scores. Associations were investigated between test scores and life characteristics, especially mother-tongue and frequency of book-reading.

Such testing can not tell us much about adult reading – the tests were initially developed for children, and are utterly “inauthentic” – never looking at actual reading. But they do allow a picture of gradations in certain abilities. ISRS divided people below IALSS level 3 into groups (A-B-C-D), chiefly on the basis of their decoding and vocabulary scores. It found that indeed as these scores go up, IALSS scores go up, too. It further found that there are clusters of skill and ways of life. People tested in what ISRS calls group A have poor decoding ability, and only moderate vocabulary. Group B’s are better at decoding but still not strong on vocabulary. Although groups C and D have better scores on both of those components, they still don’t attain IALSS level 3, which requires people to handle a broad variety of texts of increasing complexity. ISRS finds that moderate or high decoding and vocabulary scores are necessary to propel people to level 3. It claims, as an “instructional implication,” a push for phonics teaching. But ISRS also finds that high decoding and vocabulary are not sufficient. Beyond these, it is often frequent book-reading (and presumably, although the study doesn’t tell, past and present reading of all sorts) that makes the difference.

From the perspective of experienced literacy workers, this picture looks sensible, as far as it goes. It confirms some experiential knowledge, and even helps to clarify patterns. But there’s really no news. Helping people to recognize words better, and to learn more

words – is what literacy workers do every day. That gradation of abilities is utterly familiar, too. But the picture also obscures or clashes with a lot that is known in literacy work. For example:

- The “basics” – knowing words, and recognizing them in print – are certainly important, and sometimes phonics teaching is useful. But people also learn the basics just by reading. The phonics focus in ISRS isn’t an implication of its findings. It’s tacked on. It comes out of one particular theory about stages of reading development – a theory that obscures the importance – including for novice readers – of simply reading.
- Although ISRS sometimes recognizes that people learn to read by reading, it ignores what is often central in actual literacy work – *creating opportunities* for people to read. “Opportunities” means a lot – locating texts that are interesting and just challenging enough, finding ways to engage people in conversation about reading, and often much more, like dealing with day care needs or whatever else denies people the time and space in their lives to read. All that will never show up in decoding tests – but it’s often at the heart of real literacy work.
- Just as strangely, ISRS assumes that the only significant goal is getting to level 3. This is ignorant of the gains in people’s lives that are often the most important result of literacy programs – gains in confidence, and willingness to connect with other people around information and ideas in texts.

So, yes, ISRS is a nice organization of *some* of the realities that literacy work deals with. But it’s not really news, and you’d be foolish to reduce literacy and literacy work to that.

If used as a basis for designing or evaluating teaching and programming, ISRS results could even be harmful. The danger comes if they are used in a reductive way, as if they tell us what we need to know about limited literacy and literacy learning, that we can ignore more complex and richer kinds of knowledge. If teacher-training were organized in the vein of these studies (RTF pushes for something like that) the result could be narrowing or even harmful. Narrow training (training to produce what’s measured) might lead new teachers to a kind of thinking that they would have to outgrow. Even worse, using such tests to produce accountability for literacy programs might lead policy makers away from recognizing practitioner experience and expertise, and recognizing how complex and local teaching and creating opportunities for reading always are.

Beyond what it shows about decoding and vocabulary scores, ISRS aims to inform policy. It is useful for that in two ways. First ISRS shows that the number of people with markedly limited literacy is not so big – much smaller than some have been led to think by a murky understanding of the IALSS claim that over 40% lack essential skills. Second, ISRS shows important relations between mother-tongue and literacy ability. Many people in group A are second-language speakers, and ISRS surmises that they are immigrants with little education in their native countries. Group B, those with moderate decoding and vocabulary, overwhelmingly consists of second-language speakers. These presumably did have first-language schooling, and “transfer” decoding savvy to English, but don’t yet know enough English words (and probably other aspects of English, though ISRS can’t tell us) to deal with a variety of texts and tasks. The statistical patterns are confirmation for those who have already seen in practice that literacy programs must

often deal with second-language learning issues, and that ESL programs should give serious attention to reading and to the uses that learners have for literacy. In short, the numbers of those with really “basic” literacy difficulties are relatively small, and literacy and ESL development are entangled in complex ways. All this should indeed inform policy.

One further thread of policy-oriented analysis should be treated with great caution. Both reports discuss the “magnitude of investment” required to “solve the literacy problem.” RTF even speculates on the hours of instruction required to get people to level 3 (from a few dozen to over 1000). This is risky or misleading in two ways. It invites from policy-makers a conclusion that some people are just too expensive. Seniors (won’t live long enough for the investment to pay off), and group A, especially the “ESL literacy” learners (require massive investment to get up to snuff) might just be dumped – ignoring considerations of justice and equity. And these numbers make a fetish of level 3, assume it is the only thing that counts, and so divert attention from all the other gains in confidence and involvement that are often central in literacy learning.

These reports are useful contributions to the discussion of adult literacy learning and policy. But they are partial, and should be read with a recognition that knowledge and evidence gained in practice are crucial to balance and to assess the knowledge gained through surveys.

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On *Reading the Future* and Xenophobia

by Dr. Nancy Jackson

Reading the Future aims to apply high-powered statistical analysis to the problem of understanding more about the social profile of people with literacy challenges. As the report says, it aims to find ... “more of a face behind the statistics.” Most of the characteristics of literacy learners presented in this report would be familiar to people who do literacy work on the front lines. But I want to address one issue from these profiles that is quite complex and important to explore carefully. That is about the place and importance of **immigrants** in the population of adults with low literacy.

The report projects that the number of immigrants with low literacy levels will increase by more than 61% by 2031. This is a very important claim to understand. I have not reviewed the background documents that support this projection. So I don’t actually claim to know how the researchers arrived at this figure, and I have not experimented with the projection tool that they say is available on the web. But I want to say that is potentially a very slippery and socially divisive line of thinking that easily can easily be misunderstood and encourage bigotry and racism.

To understand these figures, we need to remember that the relationship between immigration and literacy levels depends on the constantly changing immigration policies of Canada. This is not my area of special expertise, but I do know that over the past almost twenty years, Canadian immigration targets have changed from admitting mainly people with relatively low levels of formal education, including many refugees, to recruiting and admitting a very high percentage of highly skilled and education professionals from all over the world. Since about 2003, approximately half of the annual intake of new immigrants has been highly educated professionals. Importantly, this means that the education profile of recent immigrants to Canada is actually **higher** than the profile of the Canadian born population. These immigrants are **not a literacy problem**. And, as long as the Canadian government’s immigration policies remain as they are now, new immigrants will also not be contributing to the growth of literacy problems as a **percentage of the population**. On the contrary, **the proportion** of immigrants with low literacy has gone down sharply, not up. But this report blurs the distinction between percentages and head counts, and uses head counts to make a misleading and sensationalist argument. Indeed, under current immigration policies, the sheer numbers of immigrants with **high** levels of literacy is increasing **faster** than the sheer number with low levels. By choosing to highlight only the bad news half of this picture, this report presents a real danger of fuelling bigotry, xenophobia, and racism.

There is one other confounding issue here. That is, IALSS based literacy tools and survey findings **fail to distinguish between English language problems and literacy problems**. This is a long standing issue in the fields of both literacy and ESL. The differences and similarities in the needs of these two groups at different levels of education has been well studied by experts, and there is a vast research literature on these issues. But while educators attend to these distinctions, governments routinely do not,

and most often fail to provide policy and programs which adequately respond to the different needs of these populations. Data such as IALSS which fail to make these distinctions count those who speak English as an additional language (sometime a second, third or fourth language) as part of the problem of “low literacy.” This completely muddles the waters … and muddies the data … and has contributes to a mismatch in services for immigrants seeking assistance. That is, highly educated immigrants professionals seeking English language services in Canada find that the vast majority of ESL courses are designed to serve under-educated newcomers. Conversely, there is ample research about learning strategies but very little corresponding programming for literacy needs of people who have limited literacy in their mother tongue. As a result, both populations remain badly served.

Furthermore and relatedly, recent research shows that many highly educated professional immigrants find themselves barred from employment in the fields for which they were trained and often practiced for years in their countries of origin. After arrival in Canada, they end up working in low wage, low skilled jobs – doctors driving taxis is the classic example – and often remain stuck there for years. This curtailing of labour market activity in turn limits opportunities for these individuals to develop high levels of English language proficiency needed for professional life in Canada. Over time, people who do not use their high level skills and knowledge begin to lose their proficiency. So here we have a picture of highly literate individuals, excluded from meaningful participation in the Canadian labour market, slowing moving ‘down’ the scale in terms of literacy and language functioning. Is this how immigrants are contributing to the growing literacy problem? Because we exclude them from meaningful participation in professional life?

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Why Policy Can't Afford to Ignore What Practitioners Know

Tannis Atkinson

When we released our brief discussion paper about *Learning Literacy in Canada* and *Reading the Future*, we quickly discovered that our comments had struck a nerve. Adult literacy learners, and many practitioners, are frustrated that they are routinely ignored by policy-makers. Despite daunting odds (Horsman & Woodrow) practitioners work hard to provide quality programming. Yet their voices are rarely heard and their experience is routinely overlooked. In public debates and discussions about literacy, who are the recognized spokespeople? How do they get to be the spokespeople? Do literacy practitioners, and students, feel represented by these spokespeople?

We understand that *Reading the Future* is one attempt to build a framework that the provincial and territorial governments can use to act, and to commit funding to adult literacy programming in Canada. This is a laudable goal. But any efforts to build a literacy strategy should build on the huge body of practitioner knowledge and practice-based research. Any national strategy or efforts to implement Labour Market Agreements should also draw on the collective wisdom that led to the 2005 Pan-Canadian literacy strategy.

We understand that *Reading the Future* is part of a larger attempt to try to calculate how much it may cost governments to implement programming that can make a difference to the literacy rates as measured by IALSS.. The goal of costing programming must not be used to determine effective programming. Adult literacy policy that is based on cost projections rather than sound pedagogy is bound to fail because it will not take into account the complex needs and barriers faced by adults who struggle with basic literacy. A major study undertaken because of Canada's relatively low position in relation to other OECD countries in the 1994 IALS (Veeman *et al*) found that adult basic education in this country has long favoured students who can move quickly through to GED rather than those with the greatest need for literacy programming.

A significant body of practice-based research, built up over the past two decades, indicates how to deal with the multiple barriers faced by adults who struggle with basic literacy. That research has shown that significant barriers to participation include:

- violence (Horsman; Norton; Alderson & Twiss: Magro)
- negative experiences of education and a lack of self-esteem (Grieve; Niks *et al*; Literacy BC)
- lack of access to education for people with disabilities (Carpenter & Readman; Gardner)
- poverty (Long & Middleton).

Practice-based research has also shown that programs are ineffective if they ignore:

- adults' motivations for learning (AlphaPlus; Barker; Kunz. & Tsoukalas; Pheasey; St. Clair)
- adults' reading strategies (Campbell & Malicky)

- how adults learn (Taylor; Niks et al)
- attitudes and approaches of instructors and tutors (Battell et al; Campbell & Burnaby; Harrow et al; Trent Valley Literacy Association)
- cultural differences (Silver, Klyne & Simard; Steeves)
- the impacts of racism (National Visible Minority Council on Labour Force Development)
- the radically different needs of first-language speakers and speakers of English as an additional language (Bell; Millar; Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities).

Policy-makers can't afford to ignore what the field knows. The only basis for solid, effective programming is sound pedagogy that takes account of students' life circumstances. Practitioners and learners from coast to coast to coast know what type of policy does, and does not, support effective adult literacy. Any initiative that ignores what the field knows is bound to fail. We know that adult learners will not 'persist' in programs that do not meet their needs, acknowledge their life circumstances and support their aspirations (Rich). We know that policies that put a time limit on learning will discourage, rather than encourage, adult literacy.

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