

Adult Literacy

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was a large-scale co-operative effort by governments, national statistical agencies, research institutions and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The development and management of the survey were co-ordinated by **Statistics Canada** and the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey. At various survey cycles, and in different ways, substantial input was received from the **National Center for Education Statistics** of the United States Department of Education.

Definition of Literacy

Many previous studies have treated literacy as a condition that adults either have or do not have. The IALS no longer defines literacy in terms of an arbitrary standard of reading performance, distinguishing the few who completely fail the test (the "illiterates") from nearly all those growing up in OECD countries who reach a minimum threshold (those who are "literate"). Rather, proficiency levels along a continuum denote how well adults use information to function in society and the economy. Thus, literacy is defined as a particular capacity and mode of behaviour: the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. Differences in levels of literacy matter both economically and socially: literacy affects, inter alia, labour quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society.

Participants

In 1994, nine countries – Canada (English and French-speaking populations), France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland (German and French-speaking regions) and the United States – fielded the world's first large-scale, comparative assessment of adult literacy. Data for seven of these countries were published in *Literacy, Economy and Society: Results of the First International Adult Literacy Survey*.

Five additional countries or territories – Australia, the Flemish Community in Belgium, Great Britain, New Zealand and Northern Ireland – decided to administer the IALS instruments to samples of their adult populations in 1996. Comparative data from this round of collection were released in November 1997 in *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society: Further Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey*.

Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland – participated in a third, large-scale round of data collection in 1998. Results for most of these countries are included in the third report, *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey*

Data Collection

The data presented in this third report were collected by the countries participating in successive cycles of data collection between 1994 and 1998, using nationally representative samples of the adult population aged 16-65. The survey was conducted in people's homes by experienced interviewers. In brief, respondents were first asked a series of questions to obtain background information about them, e.g. demographic details, work history, etc. Once this background questionnaire was completed, the interviewer presented a booklet containing six simple tasks. If a respondent failed to complete at least two of these correctly, the interview was adjourned. Respondents who completed two or more tasks correctly were then given a much larger variety of tasks, printed in a separate booklet. The assessment was not timed, and

respondents were urged to try each exercise. Respondents were thus given maximum opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

Measurement of Literacy

The IALS employed a sophisticated methodology developed and applied by the Educational Testing Service to measure literacy proficiency for each domain on a scale ranging from 0 to 500 points. Literacy ability in each domain is expressed by a score, defined as the point at which a person has an 80 per cent chance of successful performance from among the set of tasks of varying difficulty included in the assessment. Five levels of literacy that correspond to measured ranges of scores are used in the third report for analytical purposes.

- Level 1 indicates persons with very poor skills, where the individual may, for example, be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on the package.
- Level 2 respondents can deal only with material that is simple, clearly laid out, and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. It denotes a weak level of skill, but more hidden than Level 1. It identifies people who can read, but test poorly. They may have developed coping skills to manage everyday literacy demands, but their low level of proficiency makes it difficult for them to face novel demands, such as learning new job skills.
- Level 3 is considered a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society. It denotes roughly the skill level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry. Like higher levels, it requires the ability to integrate several sources of information and solve more complex problems.
- Levels 4 and 5 describe respondents who demonstrate command of higher-order information processing skills.