

# Literacies

Special Bulletin

September 2008

[www.literacyjournal.ca](http://www.literacyjournal.ca)  
[journal@literacy.ca](mailto:journal@literacy.ca)

*Hello Literacies readers & friends,*

*Recently a group of literacy workers and researchers came together to apply their expertise and analysis to two reports that could inform education policy decisions in Canada. We are sending you this Bulletin to let you know what they are saying. We hope you find this brief summary of their discussion helpful and informative. What conversations have you been having about these reports? Let us know your thoughts, ideas and questions.*

---

## Adult literacy in Canada: What do the latest numbers mean?

In Canada, the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) has become the leading indicator of how well adults use printed information to function in society. In 2008, two new reports were released that seem to outline simple solutions to Canada's 'literacy crisis.' The new reports aim to understand more about adults who are at levels 1 and 2 of IALSS. This is a worthy aim, but we urge you to read these reports critically. The reports include some recommendations that do not follow from their own data, or from other practice-based evidence about adult literacy assessment in Canada.

The two reports are:



***Learning Literacy in Canada: Evidence from the International Survey of Reading Skills***, was released by Statistics Canada in January 2008. It used data from the International Survey of Reading Skills (ISRS) to offer information that can help “policy makers, researchers and practitioners” decide “how to plan and deliver appropriate and efficient reading instruction for different adult learners” (p. 19).

Available at [www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-552-MIE/89-552-MIE2008019.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-552-MIE/89-552-MIE2008019.htm)



***Reading the Future: Planning to meet Canada's future literacy needs*** is a synthesis of work by a number of researchers who were involved in developing IALSS. This report, released by the Canadian Council on Learning in July 2008, offers program recommendations, practices, and strategies for improving the skills of the low-skilled readers identified by the ISRS.

Available at [www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl/Reports/ReadingFuture?Language=EN](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl/Reports/ReadingFuture?Language=EN)

## The reports group people differently

The reports divide people into four groups (A-B-C-D), by levels of skill. The reports are very confusing because they appear to use the same data but arrive at different results. *Learning Literacy in Canada* shows a smaller percentage of people at the lowest levels and finds that most people in group D are performing at IALSS level 3. *Reading the Future* shows higher percentages of people at the lower levels and indicates that group D individuals perform at IALSS level 2.

Distribution of Population by Latent Class/Group

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Learning Literacy in Canada	3.8%	3%	16.5%	76.7%
Reading the Future	10%	8%	31%	51%

Estimated proportion of population in each latent test by language of test (ISRS, Table 4.12)  
Characteristics of Adults Below Level 3 - Population (RTF pages 30 - 32)

These are significant differences. They result, apparently, from the fact that *Learning Literacy in Canada* only reports on the working age population, while *Reading the Future* includes seniors. Further, *Reading the Future* uses different methods to divide people into groups A – D. Given these differences, it is hard to determine quite what the reports tell us.

## What are the main concerns with these reports?

While IALSS asked adults to perform activities that they might encounter in daily life, these two reports are based on six clinical reading tests used in ISRS. Two of the tests are ‘normed’ against children and adolescents although many participants in the ISRS study are over the age of 24. Four of the six tests were conducted on the telephone, which appears to limit what they can truly show about reading.

### 1. ISRS tests do not measure reading

The ISRS tests measure “components” of reading (centrally decoding and vocabulary knowledge), not reading itself. They do not measure whether people understand what they read, nor whether they can act on what they read. They do not assess what struggles a given person has when they look at a text. They do not ask why reading is, or is not, important to people. This means that these reports ignore extensive research about how, and why, adults read.

Reading assessments *can* inform instruction, but only if they align with how people define reading and how instructors actually teach. The ISRS tests do neither. Nonetheless, *Reading the Future* recommends using a skill-based instructional approach that emphasizes print skills (e.g. phonics) and proposes practitioner training to this effect. The approach follows from the tests, but tests that do not assess how a person reads cannot legitimately be used as a basis for designing pedagogy or teacher training.

## **2. The reports ignore what we know about adult literacy learning**

Both *Reading the Future* and *Learning Literacy in Canada* ignore documented research-based and practice-based evidence about how adults learn to read and how to address individual and systemic barriers to learning. These reports:

- a) disregard what reading researchers and experienced practitioners know about the limits of using **only** a skill-based instructional approach that emphasizes print skills (e.g. phonics)
- b) pay no attention to the significant socio-economic barriers that make it difficult for adults to participate in adult basic education
- c) discount the emotional impact of the stigma of ‘illiteracy,’ which means that in many cases it is essential for learners to develop confidence in their capacity to learn in order to sustain motivation and make progress
- d) overlook the rich and varied techniques Canadian practitioners use to teach adults successfully and share in practitioner-based research reports

## **3. The reports suggest time limits for learning**

*Reading the Future* asked a panel of practitioners to estimate the amount of time required for each group to move up one IALSS level given the data provided. These estimates need to be examined from a number of vantage points: What assumptions were the estimates based on? What type of delivery is being proposed, and why? Unless we understand what these estimates are based on, we should not accept quick answers about how many hours it should take a generic learner to ‘move up a level.’

If the new policy direction is based on pushing learners through programs at a set pace, it will do nothing to address the issue of ‘streaming’ that is already far too common. The recommendations in *Reading the Future* seem to imply that policy should aim to ‘train the best and forget the rest.’ Is this an adequate policy response? Sadly, that approach would merely perpetuate one of the worst shortcomings of current literacy policies.

#### 4. The reports oversimplify issues of English & mother-tongue literacy

The reports sketch some connections between literacy and mother-tongue literacy, which ordinarily means between literacy and immigration. What they say is not nuanced or circumspect, to the point that it becomes potentially divisive and damaging. *Reading the Future* projects that the number of immigrants with low literacy levels will increase by more than 61% by 2031. This line of thinking can easily encourage bigotry and racism.

Since about 2003, about half of new immigrants to Canada each year have been highly educated professionals. Recent immigrants are more highly educated than the Canadian-born population. They are not a literacy problem. The proportion of immigrants with low literacy has also gone down sharply. Under current immigration policies, the sheer numbers of immigrants with high levels of literacy is increasing faster than the sheer number with low levels. But *Reading the Future* blurs the distinction between percentages and numbers. By choosing to highlight only the projected number of immigrants who may have difficulty reading English, it implies that Canada's 'literacy problem' is caused by immigrants. This hides the fact that foreign-trained professionals struggle for accreditation in Canada. It has the potential to fuel bigotry, xenophobia and racism.



#### Want to know more?

This bulletin highlights some of the broad concerns we have about how current research is framing adult literacy in Canada. Our intention is to spark a dialogue within the literacy community on the reports, their meaning, and their implications for practice.

This bulletin was written by Tannis Atkinson (editor of *Literacies*) and is a summary of longer, in-depth analyses written by Dr. Pat Campbell (Grass Roots Press / Education for Change), Dr. Richard Darville (Carleton University), Brigid Hayes (Brigid Hayes Consulting), Dr. Nancy Jackson (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto), and Tracey Mollins (publisher of *Literacies*).

To receive a copy of the in-depth analyses, please contact us: [journal@literacy.ca](mailto:journal@literacy.ca).