



Recently Completed Primary Research

Literacy in Everyday Life: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)

Mark Kutner, Elizabeth Greenberg, Ying Jin, Bridget Boyle, Yung-chen Hsu, Eric Dunleavy, and Sheida White, April 2007

This report provides an overview of how literacy levels (as tested through prose, document, and quantitative literacy assessments) are associated with educational level, employment, literacy practices in the family, and community and civic involvement. The NAAL study, funded by the U. S. Department of Education, administered a literacy assessment to more than 19,000 adults in households or prisons, along with a comprehensive demographic survey. This report compares how adults performed on the same assessment in 1992 and 2003, in an effort to understand whether and how literacy skills nationally have changed in the last decade.

The report concludes that, overall, average prose and document literacy levels did not change, while average quantitative literacy increased. Specifically, the proportion of those with low (Below Basic) quantitative literacy decreased, and the proportion of those with high (Proficient) prose and document literacy also decreased. Women had higher average prose and document literacy than men in 2003, whereas men in 1992 had higher document literacy than women. The average literacy levels (on all three scales) of Black adults increased between 1992 and 2003, whereas the average prose and document literacy of Hispanic adults decreased, while their quantitative literacy did not change. Older adults (50 and above) increased their average literacy on all three scales, although adults older than 65 had the lowest literacy levels. As always, educational level and literacy level are positively associated, and a higher percentage of adults completed an associate's or college degree between 1992 and 2003, while fewer adults ended their education before completing high school. Literacy is associated with income: comparing incomes of those with low and high skills, a higher percentage of adults with Below Basic literacy lived in households making less than \$10,000 a year, whereas a higher percentage of adults with Proficient literacy lived in households with incomes over \$100,000. Finally, higher literacy levels are associated with full-time employment, reading more often to children or helping them with their homework, voting, and volunteering.

For the full report: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007480>



*Edited by Cristine Smith
University of
Massachusetts, Amherst*

Reading Practices among Adult Education Participants

Daryl Mellard, Margaret Becker Patterson, and Sara Prewett, 2007

The question driving this study was: *What are the reading practices of adult education participants, and how are individual characteristics (age, education, gender,*

etc.) associated with reading practices? The researchers, as part of a larger study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), and the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) of the U.S. Department of Education, interviewed a sample of 213 randomly selected high-intermediate adult basic education students in Kansas about their reported frequency of reading the following eight types of print media: letters, e-mails, newspapers, magazines, books, manuals, directions, and diagrams.

The researchers found that adult students reported reading periodicals more frequently than other types of media. There were no differences in reading practices among these adult students by age, education level, reading level, or employment. However, men and those who reported having learning disabilities read print media less frequently. In addition, older adults were more likely to read formal or employment-related materials, while younger adults and adults with lower skill levels were inclined to read periodicals (magazines). In general, those adults who do not report having a learning disability and who read more often perform better on reading performance tests. One implication of these findings for adult education teachers and programs, the authors claim, is that “instructional activities aimed at developing reading ability should incorporate use of current materials (e.g., newspapers and magazines) to increase the amount of reading” and that “the use of workplace materials would appear relevant” to many adults (p. 210).

The full article is available (at cost) from: *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42(2), April/May/June 2007, <http://www.reading.org/publications/journals/rrq/v42/i2/>

What are the reading practices of adult education participants, and how are individual characteristics (age, education, gender, etc.) associated with reading practices?

Skill Acquisition and Use Across the Life Course: Current Trends, Future Prospects

Bill Martin, June 2007

Using census data from 1981 to 2001, this study asks *whether there have been changes in the life transitions and life “course” of Australians, such as partnering, parenthood, work, and post-secondary education.* The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) conducted the study, with funding from the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training. The purpose of the study was to inform the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector about Australians’ changing life trajectories so that VET could better accommodate adult students who seek training.

According to the study, a “conventional” life-course pathway is one in which people complete school, perhaps attend postsecondary education, enter paid work, partner, have children (and, for women, either a traditional pattern of dropping out of the workforce during childbearing years, or a modern pattern of combining paid work with motherhood). An “unconventional” life course may include living alone, or having delays in partnering, parenting, and entrance into postsecondary

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education. The study finds that, although the majority of Australians continue to follow a conventional life course, the proportion who follow an unconventional life course has been increasing since 1981. This is due to rising numbers of single parents, working mothers, people beginning postsecondary education after their 20s, and “prime-aged” men (between 25 and 54) withdrawing from the labor force. The study also documents the difference in employment patterns between those in professional occupations, who start their careers in their later 20s and continue working until retirement, and those in trade occupations, who “enter the occupations by their mid-20s and then steadily exit the occupations over their working lives, beginning this exit soon after they qualify” (p. 7).

The VET sector has been significantly affected by the rise in unconventional life trajectories since it responds to part-time adult students who are “older people beginning first qualifications; single parents; [and] men without full-time jobs,” among others. The study is an interesting attempt to look beyond the census data itself to understand how the VET system can respond to adults who look to upgrade their working skills at different points in their lives.

For the full report: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1747.html>

Primary Research in Progress

Adult Transitions Longitudinal Study (ATLAS), 2007–2011

Cristine Smith and Steve Sireci, Principal Investigators

It is now clearer than ever that completing at least some postsecondary education is critical for securing a living-wage job in the United States. However, a relatively small percentage of nontraditional high school graduates and GED recipients go on to enroll in or complete college. For the past six years, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation has been sponsoring ABE-to-College transition courses for such adults in New England. These courses, which are run by existing adult education programs, prepare adult students with the academic and study skills needed to succeed in college—along with the counseling and mentoring necessary to enroll in postsecondary education. While the courses have been successful at increasing the numbers of adult students who enroll in college, no study has yet looked at the long-term educational trajectories of such students. The Adult Transitions Longitudinal Study (ATLAS) will follow the 2007–08 cohort of approximately 300 ABE-to-College transition students for five years, in order to answer the question: *What are the outcomes for students who participate in the ABE-to-College Transition Project, and what are the factors (individual, program, and college) that influence those outcomes?*

This descriptive study, conducted by investigators at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in collaboration with the New England Literacy Resource

Center, will employ questionnaires, in-depth interviews, life histories and video, and review of program documents, college records, and employment information. The goal of the study is to inform policymakers, program practitioners, students, and potential funding organizations about the effectiveness of the program in helping participants achieve postsecondary academic success and economic/employment gains. This information can be used to help improve transition programs and increase opportunities for adult students to participate in transition courses such as these. The study is expected to be completed and results disseminated by 2012. For more information: http://www.umass.edu/cie/projects_activities/index.htm#atlas

Secondary Research, Meta-Analyses, and Research Reviews of Note

Forces Changing Our Nation's Future Andrew Sum, June 2007

Funded by the National Commission on Adult Literacy, this companion piece to *The Perfect Storm* report (see its description in the Research Digest in Vol. 1(2) of *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal*) utilizes census and international survey data to answer four questions: (a) *What is the comparative performance of U.S. adults and high school students on literacy assessments?* (b) *What are the literacy and numeracy proficiencies of U.S. adults, including those who participate in adult education programs?* (c) *What are the links between proficiencies and labor market success?* and (d) *What is the outlook for literacy/numeracy proficiencies of U.S. adults, across age, racial, and ethnic groups?*

The author, Andrew Sum, concludes that U.S. adults are about average in their literacy skills, compared to 19 other high-income countries, a performance Sum calls "mediocre." Worse, though, is the high inequality in literacy scores in the United States, where "our bottom 10 percent scores significantly below the average for their peers in other countries while the top 15 percent of performers in the U.S. ranked third highest among the high-income countries in the assessment" (p. vi). U.S. high school students also scored about average in literacy, again with relatively high inequality, and scored below average in math. Literacy is strongly correlated with educational attainment, with a wide gap between those who have a high school diploma or GED and those who don't, and a wide gap between those who have a college degree and those who have a high school diploma. At least half of all immigrants and adult education program participants fall into the lowest literacy proficiency level. Educational attainment, higher literacy, and English-speaking

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skills are associated with better job outcomes (being employed and receiving higher earnings) and with receiving more employer-sponsored job training and adult education.

The author calculates a “12 to 13 point decline in the mean prose and quantitative scores of the nonelderly population by 2030” (p. xii), and a rise in the number of adults with literacy skills in the lowest two NAAL levels from 70 million to 119 million. He bases these projections on the following: (a) national assessments show little improvement in literacy or numeracy skills over the past 15 years, (b) specific ethnic/racial groups continue to have lower levels of literacy proficiency, and (c) the population of the county is aging. Dauntingly, Sum concludes that by 2030, “the national picture ends up with both poorer average performance and a higher degree of inequality. A wide array of labor market, educational, civic, social, and health problems would be linked to such a deterioration in average literacy skills and widening equality” (p. xiii).

For the full report: <http://caalusa.org/forceschangingfuture.pdf>