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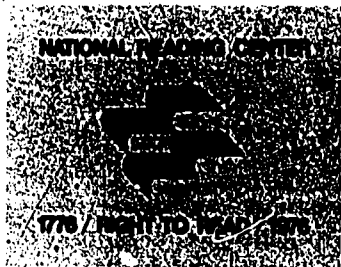
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ABSTRACT

The progress of several projects defining and measuring adult literacy is reported in this publication of the National Reading Center. A summary description of the basic approach of the project is given, rather than a digest of findings. Among the studies reported on are the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, the Adult Performance Level Study of life skills and requirements, the Louis Harris study of real-life related reading objectives, and the Educational Testing Service study of adult reading behavior. (RS)



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ADULT READING ABILITIES: Definitions and Measurements

Are there 1,400,000 illiterate adults in the United States? About 8,000,000? Or 18,500,000? Or, realistically, are there not more like 70,000,000? Evidence exists from quite valid studies to support any of these estimates. It depends, of course, on how you define literacy and which of several measurements you elect to use.

We certainly know there are far too many American adults with reading handicaps. The social and economic consequences burden the nation and sadden the lives of millions who live less full and creative lives than they might. We also know which population groups are most afflicted—the bid, rural and inner-city dwellers, the non-white and in general, poor people without much education. Large-scale remedial action need not and must not wait for better definition of the problem. The various studies based on number of school years completed, or grade levels, or on respondents' statements about their reading ability have served well so far; nonetheless, these measurements and definitions have serious limitations.

LIMITATIONS OF ADULT LITERACY MEASURES

Why are we not satisfied with the literacy data presently available? First, because they do not give us a clear and meaningful conception or "feel" for the specific reading abilities crucial at various phases of the adult life cycle. "Grades completed sometime in the past" and similar definitions are too indeterminate to further understanding or to mobilize public concern and commitment for reading improvement.

Second, the present measurements do not pinpoint the kinds of reading disabilities most troublesome, or specify precisely enough the particular groups having the greatest trouble. Therefore, we are handicapped in focusing the national effort where it will do the most good. It is the action commitment of the National Right to Read Effort which brings the definitional inadequacies to the fore.

The root cause of the definitional problem (from which, of course, inevitably stem the measurement problems) is that none of us has systematically thought through or studied the kinds and degrees of reading ability actually needed for effective participation in the post-industrial society of the 1970's and coming decades.

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NEW EFFORTS AT DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT

Several projects now underway are working toward: definitions of functional literacy more closely related to actual adult life tasks; and precise measurements useful in problem diagnosis and in assessing progress of the national reading effort.

Following is a brief description of how these projects are proceeding, derived in part from an April 19 meeting of the project directors co-sponsored by the U.S.O.E. Division of Adult Education Programs and the National Reading Center. This is not a digest of findings, but rather a summary description of the basic approaches being used. Some of the projects are not far enough along to report results; others are reported in the indicated references.

The projects, in various stages of completion, appear to be using two basic approaches for deriving the criterion reading tasks: (1) collation of expert opinion, i.e., developing a consensus on adult reading needs from the views and experience of subject experts, educators and concerned laymen; and (2) closer empirical study of what adults actually do read, for varying purposes and in various life contexts.

The first approach – to develop a broader conception of reading tasks through some form of consensus among expert and thoughtful people – is exemplified in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, in the University of Texas Adult Performance Level Study and, to some extent, in the Louis Harris and Associates studies of “survival literacy.”

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

The first summary report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading² has just become available, and its findings on the young adult group, ages 26-35, will be digested in the next issue of *Adult Reading Development*. A similar report on adult writing abilities was recently issued.³ The literature assessment will be reported in late 1972. Adult basic educators will also be interested in the citizenship⁴ and science⁵ reports.

In all these subject areas, the basic NAEP procedure has been similar: Panels of scholars, educators and concerned lay people were convened to establish the broad objectives believed suited to age groups 9, 13, 17 (in-school and out-of-school) and 26-35. More specific objectives were then refined by the same process. All aspects of NAEP work are reported with admirable thoroughness and clarity; there is a booklet describing exactly how the reading assessment objectives were developed.⁶

Assessment exercises (the word “test” is never used) are developed for each objective, and after tryout, revision and selection, are packaged for administration. The adult exercises are given to a national probability sample by means of a household survey, in which a trained interviewer obtains information from 26-35-year-olds located by a listing and screening of sample households,

The main objectives in reading were:

- Comprehend what is read
- Analyze what is read
- Use what is read
- Reason logically from what is read
- Make judgments concerning what is read
- Have attitudes about and interest in reading

The main organizational theme of the reading report gives a view of the breadth, detail and comprehensiveness of the assessment, for there were exercises related to each of these topics. Analysis of such data, when fully reported, should help us to see with much more precision than before just where the adult reading problems are. Thus, particular areas of disability can be isolated for concentrated effort in literacy and adult basic education programs. Reassessments are planned periodically which, hopefully, will show progress. It is an unfortunate limitation of the study design that older persons, who have the most severe reading problems, were not included in the sample:

1. *Understanding Word Meanings*

In isolation
In context

2. *Reading and Visual Aids*

Interpreting drawings and pictures
Reading signs and labels
Reading charts, maps, graphs
Reading forms

3. *Following Written Directions*

Understanding written directions
Carrying out written directions

4. *Reading and Reference Materials*

Knowledge of sources
Use of reference material

5. *Reading for Significant Facts*

Recognizing factual information
Retaining factual information
Understanding relationships among facts

6. *Reading for Main Ideas and Organization*

Reading for main ideas
Recognizing topic
Recognizing central thought

7. *Reading and Drawing Inferences*

Drawing inferences from information given
Drawing inferences from information given plus additional knowledge

ADULT PERFORMANCE LEVEL STUDY

8. *Critical Reading*

- Understanding literacy devices
- Recognizing mood and tone
- Discriminating fact from opinion
- Recognizing author's purpose
- Recognizing and evaluating sources

Working in a slightly broader context — adult basic education (reading, writing, computation and general knowledge) — the Adult Performance Level Study being conducted by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas, with support from the O.E. Division of Adult Education Programs, is another effort to move away from traditional academic definitions of adult literacy in terms of grade levels to description of adult life skills and requirements. Its basic approach to specifying these requirements is collation of study, thinking and experience derived from:

1. Existing research on adult needs
2. Reports of adult basic education programs
3. Interviews with employers
4. Data from a range of social welfare agencies
5. Analysis of the curricula and objectives of job-related training

The scope of these procedures should result in sets of objectives for the general or basic education of adults which will be more detailed and specific, but also more comprehensive and systematic than those presently existing. In this work, reading objectives will be a major component.

From these objectives, criterion-referenced tests have been developed which are being field tested and administered in 25 states.

HARRIS STUDIES

Two national sample studies of adult reading skills by Louis Harris and Associates, sponsored by the National Reading Center, pioneered the effort to devise real-life related adult reading objectives and measurements.⁷ They covered, however, only some of the essential reading skills required by adults, those with practical application in daily life — reading newspaper ads, telephone dialing instructions, Medicare application forms, etc. These studies of one aspect of adult reading clearly illustrate the benefits we may expect from the broader studies now underway. They tell us exactly what American adults can and cannot read in a way that challenges public concern, discussion and commitment. When shown that sizable numbers of adults cannot read well enough to fill out job applications, as is unhappily the case, most Americans will feel that this matter requires effective remedy. Both studies have been fully reported and a digest of the findings is available on request from NRC.

ETS STUDY OF ADULT READING BEHAVIORS

A second basic approach to new definitions and measurements of adult reading abilities is the Educational Testing Service (ETS) project funded by the U.S. Office of Education. Its two purposes: (1) to examine more systematically the actual everyday reading behaviors of American adults and (2) to relate reading tasks to information about the benefits accruing to adults who are able successfully to perform the tasks.

Many studies of reading behavior already exist, of course, but they have typically focused on "what," while ETS has tried to get a more penetrating view of "how much" "how often," "why" "by whom" and, especially, "how important." Thus, ETS investigated reading behavior related to such categories as: traveling and commuting, work, shopping, recreation, etc. The questions referred to actual reading activities of the day before and were addressed to a representative national sample of persons age 16 and over. This work, when completed, may give us a more detailed understanding of the reading people actually do, and how the reading grows from or relates to the daily life tasks of the typical adult.

A second purpose of the study was to relate reading tasks and skills to background characteristics of the respondents, especially to measures of socioeconomic status.

From the associations which may be revealed between specific reading behaviors and socioeconomic status, ETS hopes to develop some insight into, or some hypotheses about, how reading skill relates to participation in the economic benefits of American life.

An ultimate purpose of the research, too, is to develop more significant, comprehensive, and pertinent measurements of adult reading skills than those already existing.

OTHER PROJECTS

Not reviewed here, because they are too many and too specific, are other projects and studies which use basically the ETS approach - closer study of actual reading needs in real-life situations. They are of two types: (1) close task analysis in particular work situations to determine what reading skills are actually required and (2) readability measures or field tests of specific materials to see whether their message gets through to the intended target audience.

Do these studies suggest a second way to attack the functional literacy problem? It may be possible in many critical areas of social communication to simplify the reading materials or bring them into congruence with our increasing knowledge of what people typically can read. This seems to be a practical and humane supplementary approach, but at best it can only have limited impact. Our basic emphasis in the Right to Read Effort must always be on positive programs for building reading skills wherever needed for more fully functioning and creative citizenship.

REFERENCES:

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3. NAEP. *Writing: National Results*. G.P.O., \$1.50.
4. NAEP. *Citizenship: National Results*. G.P.O., \$1.25.
5. NAEP. *Science: National Results*. G.P.O., \$1.75.
6. NAEP. *The National Assessment Approach to Exercise Development*. \$3.00

NAEP. *Objectives: Reading*. \$1.00. Both of these reports are available from National Assessment for Educational Progress, 1860 Lincoln Street, Denver, Col. 80203.

7. *The 1971 National Difficulty Index: A Study of Functional Reading Ability in the U.S.* Study done by Louis Harris and Associates for the National Reading Center. Available from EDRS #ED 057 312 (MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29).

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