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ABSTRACT

Since colonial times, definitions and estimates of illiteracy in the United States have been debated. The Census Bureau's major indicator is number of years of schooling completed. However, average grade-level attainment is high, whereas estimates of levels of reading ability remain low. In addition, these measures are inadequate for adults. A National Assessment of Educational Progress study concluded that although young adults could read and write, too many perform at low levels of proficiency. Increasingly complex definitions of literacy are accompanied by rising literacy standards, although some argue against a national standard definition, because literacy may have different connotations depending on the setting. Particularly in the workplace, the definition of literacy should be expanded beyond reading and writing to include a continuum of interrelated reasoning and communication skills. (Addresses and telephone numbers are provided for nine people who are sources for definitions of literacy. Three additional sources of information--the Division of Higher Education and Adult Learning, U.S. Department of Education; Library Programs of the U.S. Department of Education, and the Reading Reform Foundation--are listed.) (CML)

The Literacy Beat

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MYTH #1:

THERE IS AN EPIDEMIC OF ILLITERACY IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

With blaring headlines or startling visuals, the American public has been told of late that:

- o About 72 million adults in the country "function at a marginal level or below" (Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, 1982), or
- o More than 60 million adults "read at levels that deny them access to some very basic forms of education" (Jonathan Kozol, 1986), or
- o Some 26 million adults are "functionally illiterate" (Adult Performance Level study by the University of Texas, 1975), or
- o The functionally illiterate adult population is between 17 million and 21 million (U.S. Census Bureau), or
- o Ninety-five percent of young adults, ages 21-25, "can read and understand the printed word" (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1986).

WHOSE DEFINITIONS?

Depending upon the eye of the beholder, all of these estimates are correct--or incorrect. Since colonial times, policymakers in this country have wrestled with how to define literacy, and vestiges of old definitions cling to current concepts. If the measure is an ability to sign one's name or perform rudimentary skills, 75 percent of American males were literate at the end of the 1700s. A measurement reported in 1987 declared that 100 percent of young adults could carry out simple reading tasks. Another measure frequently used is the number of years of schooling completed, a standard first established by the military for induction during World War I. Depending upon recruitment needs, this standard fluctuates-fourth grade for World War I, fifth grade for World War II, then back to fourth grade for the Korean War. As an indication of dramatically rising standards, the military now expects its recruits to have a high school diploma, or its equivalent. (Recent other changes have limited the discretion of local recruiters to accept non-traditional equivalency program diplomas. More on this in an upcoming *Literacy Beat.*)

The U.S. Census Bureau's major education indicator is the number of years of schooling completed. This information is available by census tract, so a reporter, using this indicator as a measure of literacy, could analyze a community's census tracts to obtain a literacy level.

IT GETS COMPLICATED

Finding grade level insufficient for broad calculations of literacy levels, some literacy experts began to equate grade level with reading ability. Readability formulas, based on the complexity of words, are used to determine grade-level reading proficiencies. With the average grade-level attainment in the United States at a respectable high of 12.8 years--but the estimates of functional literacy indicating a severe national problem--there obviously "is a gap between grade level attained and grade level of reading ability,"

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according to David Harman in *Illiteracy: A National Dilemma.* (Be careful about readability formulas, however. Different ones yield wildly different results.)

...AND MORE COMPLICATED

Seeking a more reasonable measure of adult literacy skills than grade levels, the Adult Proficiency Level study by the University of Texas took a different tack. Its developers selected 65 reading and writing skills which they considered basic to functioning in American society. These included such tasks as filling out job application forms and reading road signs. The results were used widely for 10 years as the literacy level for this country.

In 1985 the National Assessment of Educational Progress took the idea of proficiency a step further. Its Young Adult Literacy Survey defined literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." It used a Reading Proficiency Scale of 0-500 on several kinds of reading, with a mean of 305 (see chart). Discounting 1 percent with literacy skills too low to be able to perform simulations (one-half of whom were language-minority), NAEP asked participants to perform 100 simulated tasks, from locating information in a newspaper article to determining unit pricing on a grocery store item.

BECOMING CLEARER

The NAEP study concluded that "it is clear from these data that 'illiteracy' is not a major problem for this population (ages 21-25). It is also clear, however, that 'literacy' is a problem." The over- whelming majority of young adults could perform tasks at the lower level of pro- iciency. Only about one-half of the young adults could be considered adept readers (300 on the proficiency scale), and only one-fifth had advanced reading skills (350 and above). The same pattern holds true in writing. NAEP's assessment of writing skills (1986) found that students learn the fundamentals, but "a substantial proportion of eleventh graders, who are almost ready to graduate from high school and enter higher education or the job market, will not be able to write adequately enough to serve their own needs."

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Complicating the job of pinning down what is meant by literacy are the terms bandied about to describe those with inadequate literacy skills. Currently, one may hear "functional" literate or illiterate, "marginal" literate or even "borderline" literate. Harvard University reading researcher Jeanne Chall tried to make sense of the terms by dividing adults seeking literacy into three major groups:

- o The "totally illiterate," or those whose skills are below the fourth grade level and cannot acquire information through print;
- o The "functionally illiterate" who can read between the fourth and eighth grade level or at the minimum level needed to survive;
- o The "new illiterates" or "marginal" literates, who can function but lack the 12th grade equivalence needed in a complex and technological society.

STILL, RESEARCH ISN'T PUBLIC POLICY

At a recent conference on defining literacy sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania Literacy Research Center and the National Advisory Council on Adult Eduction, Richard Venezky argued for new terms. These eliminate the notion of incompetence associated with "illiteracy" and allow for change over time. Venezky, author of an analysis of the NAEP literacy study *Subtle Danger*, proposed "basic literacy" -- that level which allows a person to improve skills through reading and using materials; and "required literacy" -- the level that is required in any given social context. These terms include components of reading, writing, numeracy and document processing and could be identified for particular types of jobs and social endeavors.

A CHANGE IN THE RULES

The progression to increasingly more complex definitions of literacy means the rules are changing. And that literacy is a moving target. "At the heart of debates over where to draw the line between the categories 'marginal' and 'functional' are rising standards," says James Johnson in a paper for the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development. Studies show, he says, that 70 percent of the reading material in a cross-section of jobs is between the ninth and 12th grade level in difficulty; 15 percent is higher. To understand a federal tax return requires 10th grade competence, while one needs collegelevel ability to understand the average lease agreement for the rental of an apartment.

Harman argues against a national, standard definition of literacy. In a country as diverse as the United States, there are many scenarios, each with different standards and figures, he says. One might be rural, with a social and cultural life largely revolving around the local community; another might be the financial community of a large city, with a complex social and cultural life centered on the well-to-do. "In each," says Harman, "literacy may have different connotations, uses and support systems."

ENTER THE WORKPLACE

Because of the changing nature of work, says a literacy task force of the National Governors' Association, the stakes are being upped again. Workers will need critical reading, writing, reasoning and problem-solving skills to help them adapt to new job situations, it points out. The U.S. Department of Labor contends that by the year 2000 three of every four jobs likely will require education or formal training beyond high school. (Harman, on the other hand, says "employment patterns are a function of market- place demand and economic conditions, not of the availability of a literate work force.")

The NGA paper advises policymakers to expand the definition of literacy beyond reading and writing, viewing literacy more as a "continuum of interrelated reasoning and communication skills." Thus, definitions of literacy would differ for the groups of concern to policymakers:

- o Production workers who must upgrade their skills in order to handle complex computerized machinery within their changing work environment;
- o Dislocated workers faced with the heightened literacy requirements of job search and skill training necessary for reemployment;
- o Executives and managers who must learn foreign languages because of greater contacts with foreign trading partners;
- o Older individuals, recent school dropouts and others who never learned to read;
- o Immigrants who lack the English language skills needed to succeed in this country.

(Workplace literacy is full of its own issues and will be the topic of the next issue of *The Literacy Beat.*)

PROFICIENCY SCORES ON FOUR LITERACY SCALES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

SCORE	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC
Prose Literacy			
375	10.8%	0.7%	3.3%
350	24.9	3.1	12.0
300	63.2	23.7	41.1
250	88.0	57.5	72.1
200	100.0	97.7	99.8
MVS*	313.7	253.9	268.1
Document Literacy			
375	10.5%	0.9%	3.2%
350	24.3	2.5	6.7
300	65.4	19.8	37.6
250	89.9	55.5	69.0
200	97.9	82.3	91.5
150	99.9	98.6	99.1
MVS	314.9	250.9	260.3
Quantitative Literacy			
375	11.5%	0.8%	3.8%
350	27.2	2.4	11.3
300	63.3	22.0	36.9
250	89.4	60.4	74.6
200	98.0	87.4	93.1
150	99.8	98.3	99.6
MVS	313.9	254.3	263.3
NAEP Reading Proficiency Scale			
350	24.5%	3.9%	9.5%
300	60.7	24.9	40.6
250	88.7	61.1	76.0
200	78.2	89.9	95.9
150	99.7	98.8	99.5
MVS	313.1	259.2	269.6

* Mean Value Score

Source; Educational Testing Service, 1986

SOURCES ON DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY

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ADDITIONAL SOURCES ...

o The Division of Higher Education and Adult Learning in the U.S. Department of Education has various kinds of research projects on adult learning and literacy. Contact Jerome Lord, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC 20208; (202) 357-2643.

o The Library Programs of the U.S. Department of Education has just released a report on how libraries are meeting the literacy challenge. Contact Adrienne Chute, Administrative Librarian, Public Library Support Staff, Library Programs, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC 20208.

o We will get it right this time, for sure. The Reading Reform Foundation's national office is in Scottsdale, Ariz., not New York City as previously reported (that's a regional office). Contact Marian Hinds, 7054 E. Indian Rd., Scottsdale, AZ 85251; (602) 946-3567.

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