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Estimating Literacy in the Multilingual United

States: Issues and Concerns. ERIC Digest.

Literacy is a topic of much concern in the United States. The media periodically call attention to what appears to be a literacy crisis of alarming proportions with large segments of the adult population being illiterate, or very nearly so. In fact, most adults are literate at some level. Moreover, in a nation where 32 million people (over the age of five) speak a language other than English at home (Macias, 1994), many are literate in their native language and, often in English as well. Why then is there so much concern about literacy problems? One reason is that expectations regarding how much formal education people need tend to increase with each generation (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Another is that estimates of literacy, or more accurately of "English literacy," indicate that a large number of adults lack some or many literacy skills that are considered necessary to function in contemporary U.S. society. Many policymakers regard data from literacy surveys as barometers of national well-being, as indicators of the country's economic preparedness for competition in a global economy, or as gauges of how well schools are equipping students with skills assumed to be requisite for full social, economic, and political participation.

This digest reports on findings from recent literacy surveys and interprets these findings in light of theoretical and definitional issues involved in estimating literacy; it examines approaches commonly used to measure literacy and enumerates concerns about the limitations of these approaches in linguistically diverse contexts; and it concludes with a call for more research on native language literacy and biliteracy.

FINDINGS FROM MAJOR LITERACY SURVEYS: BAD NEWS AND MORE BAD NEWS

Typically, the news from national surveys is disheartening. In 1982, for example, the English Language Proficiency Survey (ELPS) estimated the number of those non-literate in English to be between 17 and 21 million; approximately 7 million of that group were from homes where languages other than English were spoken (National Institute of Education, 1986; National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, 1991). More recently, headlines reported alarming findings from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), that indicated that 40 to 44 million adults could perform literacy tasks in English at only the lowest level of a five point scale on each of three types of tasks. Moreover, a whopping 90 million--about half of the entire U.S. adult population--could perform tasks only up to the second level (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). Again, nonnative English speakers, especially those born outside the United States, were disproportionately represented at the lowest levels of ability. How

should findings such as these be interpreted? Do 90 million adults have difficulty with literacy tasks on a daily basis?

ISSUES IN ESTIMATING LITERACY

Despite the widespread interest in findings such as these, a number of considerations must be addressed when interpreting them. Attempts to estimate national levels of literacy are burdened with many difficulties, both theoretical and logistical. For example, there has been considerable debate over how literacy should be defined (see Macias, 1990; Mikulecky, 1990). Literacy cannot be measured without operational definitions. For many years, researchers tended to dichotomize findings by imposing a rigid boundary between literacy and illiteracy. Others suggested that literacy was better represented along a continuum. More recently, scholars interested in what people actually do with literacy in sociocultural contexts have argued that literacy cannot be treated as an autonomous, or singular, construct at all. They maintain that there are literacies, i.e., many specific social and cultural practices involving print (Heath, 1980; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Street (1993) further contends that literacy must be viewed from an ideological perspective which includes issues of how literacy practices relate to dominance and differences in power between groups. From these perspectives, literacy cannot be analyzed merely as isolated skills; rather, these skills must be studied in actual social, economic, and political contexts. These views appear to place both logistical and theoretical constraints on the very attempt to measure literacy at the national level, since national surveys cannot accommodate all of these concerns. Notwithstanding these issues, the endeavor to collect better data based upon more sophisticated measures continues (the NALS represents the latest of such efforts). Without such data, it is difficult to determine what types of educational programs are needed and where funding should be channeled. For example, national data can be used to determine where English literacy programs and native language literacy services or biliteracy services (e.g., bilingual ballots) are needed (Wiley, in press).

COMMON APPROACHES TO MEASURING LITERACY

There are three major approaches to literacy assessment: self-reported information, surrogate indicators (e.g., grade-level achievement), and direct measures (i.e., tests). The U.S. Census has long been a major source of data for both self-reported and surrogate data, although both types of information are considered by many to be less than ideal. Self-reported information is usually considered subjective and unreliable, and "years of schooling" is seen as a dubious indicator of knowledge or skill mastery. However, a strong correlation between "years of schooling" and "self-reported literacy" has been demonstrated (see McArthur, 1993). Direct assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and NALS (above) are considered much more reliable. However, these also have drawbacks. For example, during the 1970s, a major competency-based English literacy test, the Adult Proficiency Level (APL), was

criticized because its functional literacy competencies were narrowly derived from middle-class educational norms and behaviors rather than from a nationally representative population (Hunter & Harman, 1979). The NALS attempted to simulate real-world literacy tasks related to three types of texts--prose, document, and quantitative. Despite improvements over previous measures (Macias, 1994), there remain several persistent concerns regarding the ecological validity (real-world authenticity) of the test content and testing situation as well as the cultural and linguistic bias of direct measures in general.

LIMITATIONS OF NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

A number of concerns can also be raised with respect to how well most national literacy surveys deal with language diversity. Macias (1994) has called attention to four typical problems. First, most fail to survey literacy in languages other than English, thereby equating literacy with English literacy. This omission inflates the perception of the extent of the literacy crisis and stigmatizes those who are literate in languages other than English. It also fails to provide important data that could be used in educational programs, since adult programs for the non-literate need to be substantially different in design from those for individuals who are already literate in some language. In an attempt to address this problem, the NALS asked background questions regarding literacy in languages other than English. (These findings have not been reported as of this writing.) Second, surveys often overemphasize oral English ability, thereby equating speaking English with being literate in English. If educational programs are to be designed to promote English literacy, we need to know more about whether people speak, read, AND write English. Third, studies often undercount language minority groups due to sampling biases. (To rectify this problem, the NALS oversampled for these groups.) Undercounting makes it difficult to determine the extent of the need for literacy programs. Last, surveys are ambiguous in how they identify those in their samples, blurring the lines between language, race, and ethnicity (Macias, 1993). The term "Hispanic," for example, is often used as if it were a linguistic AND racial or ethnic designation.

NEED FOR NATIVE LANGUAGE LITERACY AND BILITERACY DATA

Although English is unquestionably the dominant language in the United States, it is unrealistic to assume that it can meet all the needs of those who speak other languages (Fishman, 1980). Given the reality of language diversity in the United States, better data are needed on language minority populations and on literacy in languages other than English. To date, only one major survey, the 1979 National Chicano Survey (NCS), has lent itself to measuring biliteracy (literacy in two languages). For populations with large numbers of individuals who speak languages other than English, or who are bilingual, such data are essential for understanding the extent of their literacy resources and needs. Secondary data analysis of the NCS indicated an overall self-reported literacy rate of 74% (52% English literate, 42% Spanish literate, and 22% biliterate). If English

literacy had been the sole focus of the survey, the illiteracy rate would have been 48%. Using a biliteracy analysis, it was 26% (Macias, 1988).

CONCLUSION

Clearly, there is a need for more data collection and analysis to determine the biliteracy abilities of the 32 million people who speak languages other than English at home and for greater sensitivity to language diversity among speakers of non-standard varieties of English (see Wolfram, 1994). There is also a need for better sampling and more authentic assessment. Even with these improvements, survey data should not be reported or interpreted in such a way as to blame or stigmatize those who have not had equal access to formal education. Finally, in interpreting results from literacy surveys, it is important to recognize the inherent limitations in the three major approaches used to date.

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