

The Literacy of U.S. Adults with Disabilities Across GED® Credential Recipients, High School Graduates, and Non-High School Graduates

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Abstract and Executive Summary

Abstract

To serve adults with disabilities without a high school diploma, the federal government and states have funded adult education and literacy programs that provide services to accommodate the needs of those adults. In addition, the Tests of General Educational Development (GED Tests) provide adults with disabilities with testing accommodations to minimize the impact of examinee characteristics on the assessment of academic knowledge and skills. Using data from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), this study examined the literacy level across GED credential recipients, high school graduates, and non-high school graduates. The study also provided evidence of the validity of the GED credential as an indication that adults with disabilities with a GED credential have achieved the literacy skills and knowledge equivalent to those skills and knowledge demonstrated by adults with disabilities with a high school diploma.

Executive Summary

People with disabilities frequently face social disadvantages and exclusions in many aspects of their lives (Carpenter & Readman, 2006). For instance, the dropout rate for students with disabilities is approximately twice that of students without disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002). According to Census 2000 (Waldrop & Stern, 2003), adults between the ages of 16 and 64 are less likely to be employed if they have disabilities. Additionally, the poverty rate for individuals 16 to 64 years old with a disability is nearly double the rate (10 percent) for those without a disability.

Adults without a high school diploma in the United States, Canada, and U.S. insular areas take the GED Tests to obtain certification of a high school level of academic knowledge and skills in English-language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (American Council on Education, 2007). For adults with disabilities without a high school diploma, the GED Tests provide accommodations to minimize the impact of examinee characteristics on the assessment of academic knowledge and skills. In 2006, more than 1,400 GED Tests examinees (about 0.2 percent of adults who took the GED Tests) took the audiocassette, Braille, or large-print versions of the GED Tests (American Council on Education, 2007).

The two data sets used in this study were obtained from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2007). One data set assessed the prose, document, and quantitative literacy of adults (ages 16 and older) and the other data set assessed the health literacy of adults. Both contain demographic and literacy level information for 19,258 adults, some of whom were incarcerated.

The average scores across the four literacy scales for adults with disabilities with a GED credential are statistically significantly higher than those of adults with disabilities who did not complete high school and are equivalent to both the average scores for adults with disabilities with a high school diploma and adults with disabilities across the U.S. ($p < .05$).

Additionally, the study provides evidence that adults with a GED credential with a learning or other disability have significantly higher literacy scores than adults with less than or some high school education on all four literacy scales across gender, race/ethnicity, age, and employment status. Compared with adults with a learning or other disability with a high school

diploma, adults with a learning or other disability with a GED credential have similar or higher average literacy scores.

The average literacy levels of adults with a vision disability with a GED credential are significantly higher than the levels of adults with a vision disability with less than or some high school education across the four demographic variables on the three scales ($p < .05$). In addition, the average scores earned by adults with a vision disability with a GED credential are equivalent to the average scores earned by adults with a vision disability with a high school diploma.

When comparing adults with a hearing disability with a GED credential to those with a high school diploma, the average scores on the four literacy scales were generally not statistically different across gender, race/ethnicity, age, and employment status. However, adults with a hearing disability with a GED credential generally had significantly higher literacy levels compared with adults with a hearing disability with less than or some high school education.

On the other hand, some adults with a hearing disability with a GED credential have literacy levels equivalent to those of adults with a hearing disability with less than or some high school education: Hispanics (document and quantitative literacy), unemployed adults (document literacy), and black adults (health literacy). Lastly, differences in quantitative literacy scores were seen for black adults (GED credential recipients had higher average quantitative literacy scores) and older (40 years and older) and unemployed adults with a hearing disability (high school graduates have higher average quantitative scores) ($p < .05$).

With this information, adult educators and policy makers can consider offering enhanced support to adults with hearing disabilities. Adults with hearing disabilities, particularly those who are unemployed, 40 years and older, and members of minority ethnic groups may benefit from targeted interventions in the specific literacy domains described earlier. This additional support holds the potential to improve their literacy skills and effectively enhance the literacy level of the nation.

References

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