

UIP-BERICHTE

UIE REPORTS

DOSSIERS IUE

4

ISSN 1014-9880

**FUNCTIONAL LITERACY
IN EASTERN AND WESTERN EUROPE**

A UIE-UNESCO/EC/OECD-CERI SEMINAR

20-22 November 1990

Hamburg

Unesco-Institut für Pädagogik, Hamburg
Unesco Institute for Education, Hamburg
Institut de l'Unesco pour l'Education, Hambourg

PRG 4.51

4

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REPORT

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Reprinted 1993

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1. The context

Since the British initiatives of the early seventies in recognizing the problem and its magnitude, functional literacy among the adult population has now become a major policy concern for many industrial countries. Literacy, as clearly underlined in the conclusions of the World Conference on Education for All, is a world issue concerning each and every country, in the North as well as in the South.

The rapid transformation of economies, both in the industrial and the service sectors, as well as the increased uses of literacy for public communication and in the areas of leisure and culture have been the main factors responsible for bringing to the surface the surprisingly high rate of functional illiteracy among the adult population in the developed countries.

The increased demand for a greater and more universal participation of adults in further education programmes is revealing the hidden difficulties, which many of these experiences in using the written communication and elementary numerical skills required in their retraining. It is to be anticipated that the increasing rate of participation in adult education activities will continue to show up an ever more widespread problem.

2. The objectives

The objectives of this joint UIE-UNESCO and OECD/CERI seminar were precisely to bring together the research initiatives already taken in this area, to offer a positive context for international intellectual cooperation in tackling this issue and, on the basis of these experiences and accumulated know-how, to explore the appropriate ways of developing policy-driven research projects in all countries, so as to enhance capacities for gaining precise knowledge of the magnitude and the exact nature of the problem, and to develop adequate strategies and programmes. Another purpose was to assess more useful ways of supporting international cooperation in this field.

The Unesco Institute for Education received a financial contribution from the Human Resource Task Force of the Commission of the European Communities to complement the budget for this project.

3. An overview of the seminar

This seminar organized by the Unesco Institute for Education with a financial contribution from the Commission of the European Community, was held in Hamburg in cooperation with the OECD-CERI.

Specialists from 17 West and East European countries as well as OECD, EC, Unesco HQs and UIE members participated in this three day seminar (see annex A).

3.1 The opening session

At the opening session of the seminar, the representatives from the three organisations (EC, OECD, Unesco) explained their objectives and programs regarding functional literacy, and the director of UIE explained the objectives and the context of the seminar.

EC

Representing the Human Resource Task Force of the EC, Mrs Rita Veiga da Cuhna indicated the priorities of the European Commission in the field of vocational training and further education, explained the different European programmes such as Petra, Erasmus, Comett and others, aiming at the improvement of the national programmes as well as at the development of further cooperation and exchanges in the related domains. A special reference was made to the important initiative taken by the Human Resource Task-Force to develop action-research projects for the prevention of illiteracy.

OECD-CERI

The representative from OECD-CERI, Mr Jarl Bengtsson, explained the reasons that have led OECD to give such a priority to adult learning and in particular to adult functional literacy. The new emerging knowledge-intensive economies and the wide-spread use of new technologies at work require an up-grading of the qualification of the labour force at all levels of the pyramid of qualifications. It is this requirement for the development of "learning enterprises" and a new concern for equity in a "total quality approach" that have brought back adult learning as a key priority at OECD. Three main projects are presently being undertaken: a major study on further education and training of the labour force, a policy-oriented research on adult literacy and economic performance in industrialized countries, and a project on adult learning.

UNESCO

For Unesco, cooperation in education has always been crucial, but a new impetus has been given to the role of Unesco in Europe through the CORDEE (Co-operation for Reinforcing the Development of Education in Europe) initiative.

An important priority, within Cordee, is the promotion of international cooperation in the field of functional literacy in the industrialized countries, both in Western and Eastern Europe, as well as in North America and in Australia and New Zealand. The UIE has been given by the General Conference a special mandate in this domain.

The programme of the seminar (Annex B) was built around three themes: the assessment of the amplitude and the differentiated nature of adult illiteracy, the analysis of this recently recognized issue and the development of policy-oriented research in the different countries.

3.2 The appropriate strategies and means for the assessment of adult illiteracy

The first part of the seminar was devoted to the development of appropriate means to measure the amplitude and to assess the differentiated nature of functional illiteracy among the adult population in an industrial country, to the social meaning of such studies and to the different methodological approaches.

The Canadian experience was presented as a base to explore the different strategies using **direct assessment** or **proxy** measures. Following a presentation by David Neice (Annex C) in cooperation with Scott Murray, a discussion in plenary session and in sub-groups underlined the following issues:

- The Canadian experience has shown that the dissemination in any country of such studies is bound to play a crucial role for setting national agendas and for the development of policies.
- Such studies are essential in order not to underestimate or overestimate the problem, and to understand the factors at work so as to formulate appropriate remedial strategies.
- The absence of reliable data on this phenomenon was stressed by many participants referring to their countries in Eastern and Western Europe.
- The kind of research methodology required should differ according to the purpose of the operation. The objective of awareness-raising leads to a different approach than the need to develop operational adult literacy programs or to modify initial education (school policy).
- Proxy measures as an alternative to direct assessment are to be discussed in relation to the specific context and social needs (for what and for whom?) of such studies, as well as to the possibilities of validating the indirect approaches through some forms of direct assessment (linked strategy).
- Direct assessment is a more reliable and valid indicator, but need not always be

used exclusively, since appropriate and less proxy measures are now available, reducing the cost and the methodological difficulties of the operation.

The most relevant proxy measures are self-assessment, frequency of reading and formal initial educational attainment (using census data), though the Canadian study shows the limits of this last indicator.

The complementarity between quantitative and qualitative measures is to be stressed, taking into consideration the advantage of the first approach for examining a representative sample of the total population and the positive contribution of the second for the study of specific groups.

One has to take into consideration the inequalities between countries as to the resources and expertise available for such studies.

The different national experiences show that two main sources are used for the financing of such research projects: media which have a crucial interest in literacy (e.g., Canada, Japan) and governments, once the political will exists.

Because of the importance of the related International Evaluation Association Reading Literacy Study for children (IEA), T.N. Postlethwaite, its coordinator, was asked to present the plan of this research aiming at international measurement of reading literacy for student populations of 9 and 14 years old. 34 countries are taking part in this study, which is to be completed by 1992.

3.3 The analysis of the factors and of the dimensions of adult illiteracy

A researcher from UIE, Jean Paul Hautecoeur, presented a paper (Annex D) on some hypotheses for explaining the phenomenon as well as its late disclosure. A discussion followed on the different dimensions of the problems, in particular in relation to the on-going economic transformations in Western and Eastern Europe, and on the relevance of these findings for the assessment of adult illiteracy. Some of the main points raised were:

- The research activities need to take into account the fact that adult literacy is a multi-dimensional issue involving community action groups, migrant pressure groups, public institutions, employers, unions, economic ministries, media, etc.
- What is meant by the measurement of literacy skills? Only the skills of reading and writing? What about numeracy? Problem-solving skills? Anticipatory knowledge? Creative abilities? Learning to learn?
- Beside the assessment of illiteracy among adult populations, other issues need to be considered: the uses of literacy, the inadequacy of public communication (movements for "plain language", the intergenerational aspect of literacy, the study of learning skills as distinct from strict literacy skills.
- The study of groups "at risk" (migrants, guest workers, school leavers, national minorities, long-term unemployed, unskilled workers, prisoners, armed services recruits, etc.) among the adult populations may be, in some countries, more urgent than an overall assessment.
- Research is needed on socio-economic costs and benefits of literacy programmes for advocacy works following awareness-raising activities.

- The concept of "functional" literacy and illiteracy was discussed indicating the inadequacy of this presently prevailing term to describe the difficulties of a significant number of adults at the work place, at home or in the community.
- The demand for literacy can be formulated from a human rights or a human development perspective or from the qualification needs related to a changing economy. Many East European participants insisted on the necessity to consider both dimensions in the present context of political, cultural and economic transformation.
- The recognition of the multi-ethnic character of European societies raises the issue of the choice of language for literacy programs.
- The issue of literacy is closely linked to the growing demand for re-training activities at all levels of the occupational ladder, and to the explosion of the social demand for adult education.

4. The development of policy-oriented research on adult illiteracy in the European countries.

During the last sessions of the seminar, the participants explored possibilities for the development of applied research in the field of functional literacy (FL) in the different countries in Eastern Europe and other industrialised countries: areas of studies, appropriate scientific approaches, relations between research and policy development, international cooperation.

The situation of the different countries in research on the subject of functional literacy is as follows:

Australia

I. Why research on FL is necessary

- There is a concern to minimize inequalities arising from inadequate literacy.
- A need exists to incorporate functional literacy strategies in labour market restructuring, employee training schemes and other measures to increase worker productivity.
- There is a concern to maximize the effectiveness of formal and non-formal literacy teaching.

II. Available data

35 projects are now in progress. Some examples are:

- Establishment of a competency ratings scale for adult literacy and numeracy to work.

out the literacy training needs of individual adults (Patrick Griffin, Philip Institute of Technology).

- Development of a course for understanding literacy in the workplace for trainers (Queensland TAFE - ACTC).
- Publication of a journal/magazine on the best research practice and policy development on adult literacy and numeracy in Australia (Centre for Studies in Literacy Education, Deakin University).
- Set of guidelines for running adult literacy programs for parents (Claremont Education Park).
- Establishment of an Australian Coordinating Agency for the training of Adult Literacy Personnel (CATALPA).
- Public awareness activities such as TV programs on adult literacy etc.

The first national survey of adult literacy in English - No Single Measure - was conducted by the Department of Employment, Education and Training. This was a part of a 2-year Adult Literacy Action Campaign and included qualitative research. This survey was based on a sample of 1496 people in 33 cities, towns and rural communities.

1% of the sample had such low levels of literacy, that they were not asked to continue with the assessment. Little difference was shown between native English speakers and adults born non-English speaking.

11% of the sample had not looked at a book in the preceding 6 months. For many adults, reading and writing is work-related, which suggests that the workplace may have a great potential as an area for improving the literacy skills of Australia's adults.

Enormous media coverage created a political awareness. The importance of political backup and economic interest was stressed.

III. Projects for the future

- There is a move towards more specific analyses:
e.g. literacy at workplace: uses of literacy or technology for adult literacy instruction.
- Social and economic costs of inadequate literacy.
- Adult literacy competency scales project.

"No Single Measure" by Rosie Wickert, Lecturer in Adult Education at the Institute of Technical and Adult Teacher Education in Sydney.

The report is available from: Faculty of Adult Education, University of Technology, PO Box 123, Broadway, NSW 2007.

Austria

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The demand arose from field studies which showed that book reading was declining.

Whereas there are no adult literacy classes in Austria, 39% of the people interviewed said they would like to improve their literacy skills.

II. Available data

Research was initiated in 1988 by the International Institute for Children's Literature and Reading Research, supported by the Ministry of Education Arts and Sports.² The survey was conducted mainly among special groups where, according to international and Austrian experiences in this field, functional illiteracy is likely to be found, e.g., prisoners, unemployed, those attending vocational training etc.

It was a qualitative study in the sense that it attempted to find out not only the degree and extent of reading and writing difficulties, but also factors that lead to functional illiteracy.

The sample included 1.269 people ranging from 17 to 30 years old.

One of the main findings of the investigation was that the identified reading and writing deficiencies were not of a quantitative nature, but represent serious shortcomings in prerequisite skills and in overall language ability.

Other small field studies on young people were conducted.

III. Future projects

- Project on "further reading" to prevent functional illiteracy among young school leavers.
- Reading habits and behaviour.

² This study was conducted in close cooperation with the Austrian Commission for Unesco. The findings were presented in a short report at the symposium "Cultural skills for everyone", held in Vienna on 6.9.89.

Bulgaria

I. Why research on FL is necessary

Political and economical changes in the country make research on FL necessary.

The ethnic minorities and the population older than 60 years are the two major target groups for FL projects.

II. Available data

There are no data available.

III. Future Projects

There have not been any plans for future projects yet.

Nevertheless, the main objectives which will have to be stressed in the future are:

- To assess the problem quantitatively.
- To stress the specificity of the problem.
- To sensitise the authorities and the rest of the population.
- To take preventive measures.

Reforms in the educational system have already been made since 1990.

Perhaps within one year some preliminary data can be available. There is a possibility of undertaking a survey in order to assess the amplitude and the specific nature of functional illiteracy.

Canada

I. Why research on FL is necessary

- Literacy organizations wanted better data both for programme considerations and for advocacy.
- Politicians and public administrators wanted real evidence on "hard numbers".
- Media figures were asking for strong data.

II. Available data

- Southam report in 1987.³ There was a national sample of 2398 adults over 21 years old. This survey was criticized, because offenders, transient populations, the mentally disabled and immigrants were not included.
- A survey conducted in October 1989 by Statistics Canada on behalf of the National Literacy Secretariat.⁴

A representative sample of 9,500 persons aged 16 to 69 was interviewed. They were tested in reading, writing and numeracy. Each questionnaire was divided into 4 levels with level 1 as the lowest and level 4 as the highest. Canadians at levels 1 and 2 are described as having skills too limited to deal with everyday reading demands. Those at level 3 have a reading proficiency enabling them to handle reading demands within a more limited range. Canadians at level 4 have reading skills sufficient to meet everyday requirements. Results from the reading tests showed 62% of the population at the top level 4, 22% at level 3 and 16% at the bottom levels 1 and 2.
- Other data are available from:
 - The Conference Board of Canada (study on employee illiteracy)
 - The Hudson Institute (for economic changes and social divisions.
 - There is some information on future skill demands implied by occupational projections.

III. Future projects on:

- Proxy modeling.
- Readership behaviour.
- Plain language.
- Prevention of illiteracy.
- Literacy in rural areas.

³ Southam Literacy Survey: *Literacy in Canada, a Research Report*, 1987, Southam News, Ottawa, Canada.

⁴ Statistics Canada, 1989. *Survey of literacy skills used in daily activities*, Statistics Canada.

Czechoslovakia (Czech Republic and Slovak Republic)

Czech Republic

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The demand comes from the following groups at risk:

- People who for certain reasons did not complete compulsory education (which was up to 14 years and later extended to 18 years).
- People living on the margin of society, e.g. alcoholics or criminals, etc.
- Unemployed young and adult people of different social strata.
- Culturally deprived ethnic minorities.
- Immigrants.

II. Future projects (see also conclusion)

Title: Functional Literacy: Educational and Social Sources in Czechoslovakia
(Czech Republic)

Slovak Republic

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The demand comes mostly from the following groups at risk:

- Groups with lower qualification professions.
- Groups with low educational level (basic school or vocational school).
- Ethnic minorities.

II. Future Projects (see also conclusion)

Title: Survey of Functional Literacy in Slovakia

France

I. Available data

France began to give public attention to illiteracy after 1984.

Many University surveys have been conducted on the development of cognitive skills, oral language performance, the psychology of learning, the relation between school failure and socio-economic background, etc.

There have been surveys conducted in 1986/87 and 1988 by INSEE - among 37 million inhabitants older than 18 years old, 9.1% have difficulties in speaking, reading, writing and understanding French⁵ and INFOMETRIE - 21.8% of the adult population in France face problems in writing and/or reading⁶.

II. Future projects

- Creation of an "observatory of illiteracy" within the Army (Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Education, etc.)

- Qualitative studies:

- Studies to be carried out by the Ministry of Education and the GPLI⁷ on FL with focus among others on the unemployed and young school leavers without any diploma.
- Research on groups at risk like the disadvantaged youth (carried out by the Ministry of Justice).

Even though the political will to research literacy achievement and to apply measures is not lacking, there seems to be no willingness yet to perceive F.L as a general phenomenon.

There is a need for more specific quantitative data.

⁵ Borkowski, J.L. "L'illettrisme" in INSEE, *Données sociales*, 1990, p. 355 - 360.

⁶ Survey conducted by GPLI, directed by F. Bayrou with the participation of the Social Action Office of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

⁷ Groupe Permanent de Lutte contre l'Illettrisme (Permanent Group to Fight Against Illiteracy): GPLI is an inter-ministerial commission, placed within the State Secretariat in charge of Vocational Training. This group was created in 1984.

Germany

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The following factors made the research on FL necessary:

- The socio-economic changes.
- Training and retraining in the new Länder.
- Ethnic German migrants.
- Unemployed youth.
- Long-term unemployed young people and adults.

II. Available data

- Data on provision (quantity and quality aspects).
- Some small scale evaluation programmes.
- Several small research reports on different issues of FL.
- Data on the connection between adult literacy and learning difficulties.

III. Future projects (see also conclusion)

- Assessment of the level and the nature of functional illiteracy in the new Länder or maybe in all Länder of Germany. The objective is to assess literacy skill levels vis à vis new labour market needs.
- Remedial action in primary schools: language and literacy: learning strategies in basic vocational training.

Greece

I. Why research on FL is necessary

Some of the groups who mostly need programmes on FL are the unemployed and the people who need to be retrained.

II. Available data

There has been very little research. However, the existing studies seem to indicate that 20% of people aged 15 years and over are semi-literate.

III. Future projects

There are two action-research projects on training of practitioners of FL and on prevention measures in school.

Hungary

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The factors which make research on FL necessary are:

- The political and economic transformations.
- Communication gaps within the society.
- Growing unemployment.
- The ethnic minorities.

II. Available data

In the 80s the Ministry of Education conducted a study which assesses the number of people finishing secondary school.

There have been other researches carried out from some institutes, which nevertheless were also focused on the general educational system.

III. Future projects

- The Institute of Public Opinion and Research is planning a research on the distribution of levels of illiteracy in the Hungarian population. Other researches are planned such as:
 - Reading habits, uses of literacy and communication gaps in society.
- The problem is the lack of financial resources.

The Netherlands

I. Why research on FL is necessary

- Whereas governmental policies of investing in Adult Basic Education Programmes began as a service to immigrants, it soon became apparent that the native population also needed help.

- The labour market situation and socio-educational policy have made the research on FL necessary.

II. Available data

Preliminary results showed that 1-5% of the population are functionally illiterate, whereas this result seems doubtful when it is compared with other surveys conducted in Canada, England, France, and the U.S.A.

III. Future projects

The provision is already in place. But plans for future research are not yet clear. However there are researches planned on:

- Literacy demands in the workplace.
- Evaluative studies.

Poland

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The factors which make research on FL necessary are the following:

- Economic changes and unemployment
- Political participation
- Restructuring of schooling
- New technologies - European integration and mobility
- Rural underdevelopment

There is a demand coming from the following groups:

The long-term unemployed, remote rural populations, the Gypsy community, communities in areas where outdated and environmentally hazardous processes demand redeployment, newly graduated and not yet employed young people.

Before undertaking researches there is a need for a coalition between the government, universities, trade unions, associations of the unemployed, religious organizations, etc. The problem is that until recently education was not a major priority of the government.

II. Available data

A study in 1983 showed that 3.4% of employed people had not completed primary education.

III. Future projects (see also conclusion)

There are studies which are conducted by the regional or local institutions. The problem of data processing has to be faced. There is also a problem of human resources: out of the 4 institutions which existed before, there is only one since January 1991.

The following projects are planned:

- Functional illiteracy impact on re-deployment of the labor force.
- Functional illiteracy and socio-political participation in democratic institutions.
- New adult education strategy (content and methods), and new forms and role of media/counseling in educational matters.
- A project for a research program on functional literacy concerning the target groups within the labour market is now taking place (see conclusion).
Its title is: Policy-oriented Needs Assessment Research.

Romania

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The factors which make research on FL necessary are the following:

- The economic situation: passage to the market economy:
 - Transfer from quantity to quality
 - Unemployment problem
- The political situation, the demographic situation.
- The educational reforms.

The different target groups are:

- The recruited population - i.e., young people who have compulsory schooling and are employed in non-qualified positions.
- The young unemployed.
- Industrial school-leavers, who are badly prepared to enter into working life.
- The young rural inhabitants who are much more exposed to functional illiteracy than the urban workers.

II. Available data

There are no data available.

III. Future Projects (see also conclusion)

Title of the project being developed: Functional Literacy and the Labour Market.

Spain

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The demand for research on FL comes from:

- The Spanish Department of Education and the regional governments, in order to develop appropriate Adult Education policies.
- There is also a general demand from society: practitioners in order to evaluate and improve their programmes, specialists in education in order to develop the minimum AE programmes and curriculum adapted to the adult population.
- Both national and specific research is necessary.

II. Available data

Quantitative research took place in Catalonia and the Canary Islands.

III. Future Projects

A national survey is going to take place in Spain and the results are going to be available in 1992. This will be a quantitative research on a sample of 20.000 people with skill assessments related to everyday-life tasks.

By the end of 1992 there are also going to be data available from qualitative research (life histories, discussion groups and systematic observation).

Sweden

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The demand comes mostly from school leavers, immigrants, men and women with limited formal education or functional disability.

Literacy is a priority in the Swedish Educational Research community.

There is a strong policy focus on basic skills of the working force.

The right to A.E. has been introduced through a new educational legislation.

II. Future Projects

- Adult educational provision for priority groups.
- Bridges with other European countries
- Educational standards in A.E.
- Linguistic and didactic aspects of A.E.
- Assessment of level of adult illiteracy.

Regarding this last project, Sweden is sceptical about using proxy measures. Direct assessment is preferred.

Data on employment difficulties may be used to break down the official "facade" that there is no problem.

Switzerland

Switzerland is very late in taking measures, because until now the authorities ignored the problem.

I. Available data

Research has been carried out by some non-governmental organizations and the University of Geneva.

There are some data available from the pedagogical examination of students enrolled, and some specific studies on groups of the unemployed, etc.

II. Future Projects

A project is foreseen in order to assess the amplitude of functional illiteracy among the adult population of the Romansch canton of Grisons/Graubünden.

U.K.

I. Why research on FL is necessary

Since 1970 there has been a national focus on Adult Basic Education. Now there is a demand from the vocational lobby (training needs, unemployment), but there are few resources available. There are research needs arising from practice in order to systematize the knowledge gained through 15 years of experience.

II. Available data

- Literacy, Numeracy and Adults, 1988¹
Questions were asked about literacy difficulties as part of a large, longitudinal survey. 10% of young adults reported difficulties with reading or writing. This study was conducted by ALBSU (Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit) - a national agency has carried out many innovatory development projects and surveys into assessing student progress.
- APU (Assessment of Performance Unit)²
- RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy)
This is a national network linking researchers and practitioners and developing participative models of research.

III. Future Projects

The following projects are planned:

- Carnegie inquiry into the third age, carried out by the University of Edinburgh. This includes education and training for older people.
- There has been no large scale national assessment planned, but many smaller studies focussing on ethnic minorities, long-term unemployed, parents, literacy in everyday use etc.
- Literacy needs in workplace.
- Prevention through reform of school curricula.

¹ Hamilton, M. 1987. *Literacy, Numeracy and Adults: Evidence from the National Child Development Study*. London: ALBSU.

² Assessment of Performance Unit. 1988. *Language Performance in Schools. Review of APU Language Monitoring 1979-1983*. Slough: NFER/APU.

U.S.A.

I. Why research on FL is necessary

The demand for research on FL comes from the following sectors:

- From the government: Departments of Education, Labour, Health and Human Resources
- From the public sector: The need comes from children and youth.
- From the private sector: Training needs exist for a better quality of workforce.

II. Available data

There have been several large surveys carried out such as:

- The Adult Performance Level Study. A survey carried out by the University of Texas in 1975.¹⁰ This research asked a sample of 7,500 adults to perform a range of literacy tasks similar to those encountered in their everyday lives. It was found that 23 million adults in the U.S.A. lack basic literacy competencies and a further 34 million function at a low level.
- The most recent and influential survey is that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)¹¹ carried out in 1985. The survey covered a national sample of 3,600 respondents aged between 21 and 25 years. This test makes use of an overall reading scale, plus three literacy components: Prose Literacy, Document Literacy and Quantitative Literacy. Each dimension was scored from 0 to 500.
The survey found that overall 96% of young adults could perform above the 200 level, which required them to locate a single fact in a news article or write a brief description of a job they would like to have.

¹⁰ Northcutt, N. N. 1975. Adult Functional Competency: A Summary. University of Texas at Austin. ERIC Report ED-114-609.

Kirsch, I. and Jungeblut, A. 1986. Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Educational Testing Service Report No. 16-PL-02. U.S.A.

III. Future projects

37 new projects are associated with the new National Centre of Adult Literacy (NCAL) in Philadelphia University.

As well as a study on workplace literacy, the U.S federal government is planning an extensive general survey of adults from 16 to 64 years old, which will take place in 1991-1992.

USSR

I. Why research on FL is necessary

Research on FL is necessary due to political and socio-economic changes.

II. Available data

There are no exact data available.

III. Future Projects (see also conclusion)

A research project is planned with the following title:

Functional Literacy in a changing society: Analysis, Diagnostics, Measurements, Prognoses.

5. Conclusion and follow-up

The first and fundamental conclusion of the seminar is the necessity of developing further policy-oriented research on adult literacy in order to make available to decision-makers, practitioners and the population involved the information required to assess the magnitude of the problem and to develop appropriate measures. The experiences of countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK and the United States are already indicating the importance of such studies in the process of developing national awareness and policies.

The economic necessity of such operations has been underlined by all participants, who referred to the on-going economic transformation, the growing demand for re-training among all sectors of the active population, the severe unemployment problems among workers of all ages, and the cost of an unskilled labour force in the present state of the national economies.

The political necessity of such activities was also stressed in reference to the vital contribution of civil society and the new role that the media are now playing in Central and Eastern Europe. The right to learn is, in this context, gaining new momentum.

Such studies, with the aim of evaluating the present situation among the adult population, will contribute significantly to the on-going reforms of the educational systems and will give indications for the development of preventive measures against illiteracy.

Finally, the new social movements in all European countries, the third age groups, the revival of ethnic minorities, and the movement for improvement of the quality of the education system are beginning to require such policy development activities.

Applied research is needed for awareness-raising, for policy development, for the elaboration of appropriate measures for special groups at risk.

- The second conclusion of this seminar is the emergence, though in a very uneven manner, of studies and consultations on the issue of functional literacy in most countries represented at this seminar. Much interest has been shown in the present Canadian experience carried out by Statistics Canada and the Secretary of State in 1989. The issue of illiteracy is no longer confined to the Third World, but is now a problem facing all countries at different levels. The issue that between one fifth and one fourth of the adult population of industrialised countries have severe difficulties in reading and writing, is now becoming a serious question deserving attentive analysis, public consultation and concrete measures.

- The third conclusion is that too little is known at present about the on-going initiatives taken in the different countries and simple mechanisms are needed to facilitate international cooperation in that domain. The UIE has been called upon to play a greater role in that direction. If the lines of communication between researchers and decision-makers are too weak, they are even weaker at the international level. The participants underlined the need for more active exchange networks, for exchange of ideas and methods, for cooperation on the planning of learning experiences, on curricula development and on further training of trainers, as well as for joint comparative studies.

One of the objectives of the seminar was the development of applied research in the field of functional illiteracy in Eastern and Central Europe. Only seven months after that seminar, five projects have already been developed in cooperation with the Unesco Institute for Education. The consultation required to assure the further utilization of such studies has been undertaken and in most cases the negotiation to find appropriate financial support is well advanced.

- The most appropriate conclusion of that seminar is to report as follows on the state of progress of these five projects:

Czechoslovakia (Czech Republic and Slovak Republic)

As the economic and socio-demographic characteristics of each of the Republics are different, two separate policy-oriented researches have been conducted. Nevertheless, the aims, methods and time schedule are similar, and cooperation between them has been assured.

The two researches are aimed at-risk groups (ethnic groups, minorities, unemployed, young people who did not finish compulsory schooling etc.).

The main purpose of the researches is to offer to the decision makers and socio-economic groups the information needed to develop adult basic education programmes for special target groups.

As both Republics are facing a problem of financing, the UIE is presently collaborating with them, so that external resources can be found from Scandinavia and Austria.

The coordinators are:

Czech Republic: Institute of Educational and Psychological Research, Charles University, Prague.

Slovak Republic: Institute of Experimental Pedagogy, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava.

Czech Republic

The objectives of the proposed project are :

- To describe the phenomenon of functional illiteracy through the indicators of its existence.
- To explain the sources of the emergence of functional illiteracy (the educational and social determinants), in order to suggest preventive measures for school leavers with learning difficulties and give indications for further development of adult literacy programmes.

The methods to be used will be empirical (questionnaires, interviews, life stories, proxy methods and knowledge assessment) as well as statistical (national census data).

Timing:

The first activities such as discussions with the researchers and staff of the centres for the unemployed are going to start during the second half of 1991.

The second and main stage of the project (including development of methods, piloting of questionnaires, data collection and analysis) is starting in January 1992 and the results have been foreseen for December 1993.

Initiatives are being taken to sensitize the authorities on the need of research on FL.

Slovak Republic

The objectives for the already developed project are:

- To collect data on the existence of functional illiteracy. Special attention will be to detect the groups at risk.
- To make comparisons with other national surveys in geographically close areas.
- To address target authorities (Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Education, Trade Unions) to make adequate provisions to minimize functional literacy.

The methods to be used are:

- a. Background interviews: socio-demographic data on individuals; reading habits of individuals - frequency of reading newspapers, magazines, books; and self-rating scales.
The interview data will serve as means to explain data gathered by help of other survey instruments used in this investigation and are also expected to provide proxy measures.
- b. Test of encoding skills. This is a test of basic reading skills - i.e., match a picture or a number with an adequate word.
- c. Text comprehension.
The interviews and tests will be handed out to households, schools and workplaces.

Timing:

This is a two-stage project:

- a. Develop the measuring instruments and use them during the pilot study.
Specify more closely the sample and locate the individual groups.
- b. Collect the data.
Process and evaluate the data.
Write a report containing quantitative evidence and interpretations of it.
Write a short booklet, and distribute it to ministries, trade unions, mass media and

other institutions, which will act as a practical introduction to functional illiteracy as well as a warning about its economic, social and educational consequences.

Authorities have approved the project (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Slovak Republic).

Germany

The research project is aimed at the risk groups (ethnic German migrants, unemployed youth, long-term unemployed, etc.)

The objectives shall be:

- The assessment of the level and nature of functional illiteracy in the 5 new Länder and maybe also in some old Länder of Germany (analysis of literacy skills requirements vis à vis the new labour market developments).
- The development of respective educational programmes for the above mentioned risk groups as well as a new plan to develop the overall educational system of Adult Education in the new Länder.

This research project is going to start in 1992 and its results are planned for 1995. Funds for this research are likely to be given from the Federal Ministry for Education and Science. Approaches have been made in order to receive funds from other institutions too.

Poland

UIE has given financial support for a Polish specialist to prepare a proposal spelling out what needs to be done in the field of FL: for the development of appropriate policy towards specific target groups within the labour market. Consultation, data collection and assessment processes are foreseen through the establishment of a special Task Force in order to develop efficient programmes. This proposal has been submitted to the UIE and approved by the Polish government. Its aim is to give to the decision maker a reliable picture of the main groups at risk within the labour force and of the need of basic education for these groups.

The project is to be developed by the end of 1992.

Romania

The Institute for Educational Sciences has started a project on the illiteracy problem in Romania.

The objectives of the research are :

- To evaluate the real dimension of the problem.
- To give information on the precise number of the target population (unemployed, young soldiers, students who finish the technical schools).
- To sensitize the political authorities and the rest of the population.
- To take preventive measures.

The methods to be used are questionnaires, case studies and research action.

The Institute for Educational Studies is going to cooperate with the Institute of Sociology in Bucharest, the Ministry of Employment and Social Protection as well as the Ministry of Education and Sciences.

Results are awaited within 1991.

UIE has agreed with Statistics Canada the training of two Romanian researchers.

USSR

The Research Institute of Adult Education, USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences in Leningrad, is going to conduct the research.

This is going to be a research on FL among the general population in different regions and different spheres of activity (industry, agriculture, services, education etc.) as well as branches of the national economy.

- Research on Adult Lifelong Education. Quantitative and qualitative aspects of literacy and FL.
- Cultural and national context of functional illiteracy.
- Rural FL in the changing economy.
- FL at the workplace in the changing economy.
- Further education of the employed population.
- FL and school education.

In the initial stage a pilot study, the elaboration of methodology as well as a design of the sample are going to take place.

The results are awaited at the end of 1992.

**Seminar on National Capacity Building and Training in Literacy Skill Assessment
12/11/91 - 20/11/91**

This will be a tailor-made training to improve the methodological level of the policy-oriented projects in the above-mentioned countries.

Before the seminar, proposals will be reviewed by a panel of experts and questions will be sent back to the specialists, in order to have a feed-back for the seminar.

During the seminar two operations will take place:

1. Working Sessions between experts and the national teams on their respective priorities.
2. General methodological seminar on the Canadian project and its methodology.

After the seminar there will be a follow-up by correspondence of each of the projects.

The UIE team will be responsible for the coordination and follow-up of all the projects.

ANNEX A

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LISTE DES PARTICIPANTS AU SEMINAIRE

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ANNEX B

PROGRAMME

Tuesday, 20th November

Morning Session

- 09:30 Opening: the purposes of the meeting : Unesco, OECD, Commission of the European Communities.
- 10:00 Presentation by the participants indicating briefly their evaluation of the recent developments related to the assessment of functional illiteracy in their country.
- 10:45 Coffee
- 11:00 A preliminary clarification of the definition of functional illiteracy. The organization of the seminar proceedings. (The co-chairpersons)

First theme: The analysis of the amplitude and the differentiated nature of adult functional literacy: the need for such data and the choice of appropriate methodologies.

- 11:30 A round table of 7 national and international experiences (10 minutes per intervention) Australia, Canada, France, Hungary, UK, USA, UN): the origins of such inquiries and the main conclusions.
- 12:30 Lunch

Afternoon Session

- 14:00 Presentation of the principal findings from the OECD study: the reasons for such inquiries and the methodological approaches.
- 14:30 The possibilities of developing "proxy measures", "appropriate parameters" and sectorial studies for such an assessment: some proposals from the Canadian pilot project.
- 15:00 Coffee
- 15h30 Discussion in sub-groups: exploration of the possibilities and the approaches for appropriate studies on this problem in other European countries.
- 18:00 Reception

Wednesday, 21 November

Morning Session

Second theme: The relevance of the main hypotheses (for explaining the phenomenon) to research on the measurement and assessment of the magnitude and the nature of adult illiteracy, and its relation to policy development.

9:00 Presentation of sub-groups' reports: exploration of the possibilities of such policy oriented research and of the different approaches.

9:30 The changing uses of literacy and its impact on important minorities among the adult population remaining sub-literate. Implications for research and development. A UIE paper: Jean-Paul Hautecoeur

10:30 Coffee

11:00 The on-going transformations in the industrial and service sectors of the Western and Eastern European economies, as factors revealing the issue of adult illiteracy. The implications for assessment of illiteracy and for policy and program development. The OECD study.

12:30 Lunch

Afternoon Session

14:00 Discussion in sub-groups: Implications for research on the situation of adult illiteracy and its relation to policy development.

16:00 Coffee

16:30 Discussion in sub-groups: Second theme (continued) and preparation of third theme.

Thursday, 22 November

Morning Session

Third Theme: Identification of policy-oriented research issues, possible projects and areas of international cooperation.

- 9:00 Synthesis of the discussion on the first two themes: the possible paths for policy-oriented research projects. (Reports from the sub-groups).
- 10:00 Discussion and identification of plans for the further development of research and international intellectual cooperation on functional literacy in European countries.
- 10:45 Coffee
- 11:15 Discussion (continuation)
- 12:00 Conclusion: proposals, plan for further work recommendations, etc.
- 13:00 Closure

ANNEX C

**DIRECT VERSUS PROXY MEASURES OF
ADULT FUNCTIONAL LITERACY:
A PRELIMINARY RE-EXAMINATION**

Working Paper #2

Prepared for the Joint OECD/UNESCO Seminar
Hamburg Nov. 20-22, 1990

by

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Original: 9-11-90
Revised: 10-1-91

DIRECT VERSUS PROXY MEASURES OF ADULT FUNCTIONAL LITERACY: A PRELIMINARY RE-EXAMINATION¹

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to re-assess the value of certain "proxy" or surrogate measures of adult functional literacy and illiteracy in light of new evidence and data available which employ "direct skill assessment" measures. The following sorts of practical questions have spurred this inquiry:

- 1) Now that certain sophisticated direct skill assessments have been undertaken, what is the current match or mismatch between the new results and the traditional proxy measures of educational attainment:
- 2) Are there any other "strong" correlates of adult functional literacy, besides education attainment, that would work well in surveys;
- 3) Can any of these "strong" correlates be combined into a new rough proxy index that might be utilized elsewhere:
- 4) What would be the risks of its application, at least for the short term, when compared to the possible benefits; and
- 5) Which is ultimately preferable, direct skill assessments or proxy measures?

The paper will begin with a brief discussion of concepts and definitions and then will move on to a discussion of the history behind the use of proxy measures for estimating adult literacy and illiteracy. A discussion of the general inadequacy of proxies will lay the groundwork for a review of the most recent alternative: the direct skill assessment procedures. The Canadian approach to direct assessment, developed by Statistics Canada, for and in consultation with the National Literacy Secretariat, will be highlighted as one of the most advanced and fully developed models of this strategy available today.

The paper will then move on to a discussion of the strong correlates to adult literacy skills found in the Statistics Canada survey and will re-examine the potential adequacy of proxy survey measures in light of the new results now available through direct skill assessment. The strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches will be discussed for the near and long term development of international comparisons.

Concepts

In a previous paper we developed a lengthy discussion of the concept of adult functional literacy and its pitfalls. On reflection, it is now our view that the general inadequacy of definitions offered so far stems from the fact that literacy is best grasped not as a generalized concept, but rather as a set of information processing skills which are accomplished with varying success within specific contexts and circumstances, and using particular materials or stimuli.

Literacy, therefore, is ultimately best underpinned by an empirical and operational definition. If people can correctly perform certain adult reading tasks they then embody a certain skill level; and if they can do more, they have a different skill level, and so on. Adult literacy, our research shows, is a continuum of these skill levels; each level becoming more complex and demanding, but each requiring both decoding and decision skills related to specific contexts of functioning.

The virtues of an empirical and operational approach are many. First, the semantic tendency to exaggerate and juxtapose the two black and white categories of "the literate" and "the illiterate", while not entirely eliminated, is at least subdued. Secondly, the notion of a telescoping continuum of skill levels is a much better empirical reflection of adult functioning than is the old rigid dichotomy. Third, it allows us to steer wide and clear of the "conceptual" debates, which, while still evergreen, occupy too much thought and energy which would be better devoted to the matter of establishing relevant empirical standards of adult functioning. And fourth, and not in itself an insignificant accomplishment, an operational approach will let us successfully move back to the conceptual level with a very simple and elegant definition which speaks to the lives of adults.

Thus, our current favourite is the definition offered recently by Statistics Canada where adult functional literacy refers to:

"The information processing skills necessary to use the printed material commonly encountered at work, at home, and in the community."³

The term "information processing skills" encompasses the three pillars of reading, writing, and numeracy abilities and includes both decoding and decision skills. The skill levels which emerge are empirically identified and refer to the contexts and requirements of modern industrialized countries and to the specific materials which are commonly encountered in work, at home, and in community life. This definition also carries the implicit sense that functional literacy is a requirement for full citizenship participation.

The Use of Proxy Measures

In North America, the use of surrogate or proxy measures to estimate the literacy skills of the general population stems from two distinct traditions. One tradition is rooted in self-report data gathered for many years in both the U.S. and Canadian Censuses. The second tradition is derived from UNESCO's worldwide effort to measure (and eradicate) illiteracy; and to its specific functional application to industrialized countries by the use of grade attainment proxy measures. We will deal with each in turn.

For decades, the Censuses taken in North America asked respondents, as a regular part of the Census data collection effort, to self-report whether they could both read and write a simple message. In the United States, as Stedman and Kaestle (1987) have noted⁴, there was a tremendous reduction in the self-reported rates of illiteracy over the century from 1870 (about 20%) to the 1970's (.6 percent). The situation was quite similar for Canada, so much so, in fact, that the Canadian Census ceased collecting such information in 1931.

What is to be made of these Census based self-report measures? At the turn of the century, to be able to say you could read or write a simple message was unlikely to involve the same skill levels required today. And in all periods prior to the end of the second world war, the term "illiterate" was reserved for those with virtually no reading

skills at all. Self-report, at least when people are directly asked if they are able to read or write, is inherently difficult. Those who do not read at all or who do not read well are quite likely to practice deception when questioned about their skills. And certainly, if the method of posing the questions is made in terms of a literate versus illiterate dichotomy, the emotionally charged character of these terms will skew the results. We will return to this later when we look at other ways of tackling self-assessment.

However, what cannot be denied, is that such direct questioning shows that basic illiteracy, the inability to read and write anything at all was almost absent in North American societies by the middle of the 1900's, except for unusual instances resulting from extreme economic or congenital factors. So people may have been self-reported literates, by the standards of 1900, but would they be functionally literate by the standards of today?

The UNESCO approach to proxy measures goes more or less to the heart of that question. UNESCO in 1978 issued guidelines to member states to collect data on adult illiteracy. Three approaches were suggested: 1) a census question, b) special survey tests, and c) estimates based on school enrolment or educational attainment. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO in 1983 suggested, at least for Canada, that since direct measures of the number of basic and functional illiterates were not available, the percentage of adults with less than Grade 5 could be used as a proxy indicator of basic illiteracy.⁵ Similarly, the percentage of adults who had not completed Grade 9 could be used as an indicator of functional illiteracy. These education attainment measures were seen at the time to be satisfactory as complementary measures, but are not now believed to be sufficient to portray the true face of adult illiteracy.

It is generally accepted that those who remain in school beyond Grade 5 have an excellent chance of acquiring basic reading and writing skills and of preserving them for life. The inverse would then likely be true of adults who did not pursue their education beyond the Grade 5 level. This inverse may not be true conclusively, but it certainly seems plausible.

The validity of educational attainment as an indicator of functional literacy rests on two premises: that most individuals who have completed Grade eight (or first level) are thought to be capable of meeting the minimal expectations of their community; and that

they have reached a level of personal autonomy high enough that they can further improve their basic skills on their own.

However, there is considerable disagreement in Canada as to the validity of Grade eight or nine completion as an indicator of functional literacy. Some believe that it underestimates the magnitude of the problem, and that Grade 10 completion is more appropriate to Canadian society⁶. Others argue that it produces greatly inflated estimates since many persons with little formal education are nonetheless highly literate⁷. These debates point to some of the problems of functional literacy as a "relative" concept.

The use of educational attainment and years of schooling as proxy measures for rendering a picture of how a population is becoming literate is the cornerstone of the various statistical comparisons and indicators generated by UNESCO on literacy. Broadly speaking, for many developing countries any substantial educational attainment, but particularly the completion of first level (primary or grade school), is seen as a progressive attack on the problem. For many of the industrialized countries, such as the O.E.C.D. members, the picture is somewhat less clear since mass compulsory education often makes comparisons at the first level less appropriate. Furthermore, and not to be dismissed lightly, is the thorny matter of just what kind of basic literacy skills students are receiving while they are actually enrolled in the first level in some industrialized countries.

The question becomes simply this: are there people in industrialized societies, such as Canada, who have the requisite grade level, be it either first level or even second level, but who don't have the skill levels which would be recognized as literate?

To this there can be no hesitation in the reply. Yes certainly, if we use grade attainment as our best proxy, we will end up with both falsely labelled literates and falsely labelled illiterates.⁸ Now that results from various direct skill assessment studies are accumulating from several countries, the evidence is clear that a strong positive, but certainly less than perfect correlation prevails between grade attainment and real world skills. This will be demonstrated later in this paper. Some persons with quite high grade levels are not fully functional, and conversely some individuals with only modest education are highly literate.

This new evidence has been used by literacy researchers to further devalue the utility of proxy measures, and more particularly, to point out the waning validity of treating mass public education as the sure road to literacy. However, a brief review of developments in direct skill assessment will give us a better grip on the debate.

Direct Skill Assessment

In North America, direct literacy skill assessment has been propelled by the fusion of tests of basic reading skills with survey research technology. Examples of the types of studies which now exist, with emphasis on the more notable examples of the last 10 to 15 years are the following:

- a) In 1971, Harris and Associates administered a test of basic reading skills to a national sample of American adults and concluded that 15% of those tested had serious difficulties understanding a simple text⁹.
- b) In 1975, the University of Texas at Austin developed a comprehensive battery of tests of adult competency, the Adult Performance Level (APL), which it administered in 1977 to a representative sample of American adults. The study concluded that 20% of respondents did not have the minimum skills required and were deemed functionally incompetent. Another 34% did not have an adequate command of the knowledge and skills necessary for them to participate fully in the life of their society and were dubbed marginally competent¹⁰.
- c) In 1986, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered a battery of reading tests to a representative sample of young Americans aged 21 to 24. The researchers' major conclusion was that even though only 5% of the young adults experienced serious difficulties with basic reading, the percentage of individuals who do not have the skills required of members of a post-industrial society is considerably higher, particularly among the poor and among ethnic and racial minorities. They found that 6% of young adults read below the fourth grade level, and 25 percent below the 9th grade level. The NAEP researchers did not, however, create any specific categories of illiteracy¹¹.

- d) In 1987, Southam News Inc., a Canadian newspaper chain, commissioned a survey of adult Canadians using reading tasks borrowed from the NAEP study of young adults and based on a sample of 2,400 cases. A jury of Canadian citizens examined the items and selected those they considered essential to describe someone as functionally literate. Those respondents who answered less than 25% of those items correctly were deemed basic illiterates. Those who answered less than 80% of those items correctly were deemed functional illiterates. Basic illiterates and functional illiterates combined were found to represent 24% of the Canadian population or the equivalent of 4.5 million people.¹²
- e) In October 1989, Statistics Canada conducted a large sample survey (9,455 cases) using a methodological framework adapted from the NAEP young adult survey but which used all newly developed test items including specific tests of reading, writing and numeracy skills¹³. The study was carried out in both English and French on a sample derived from the monthly labour force survey. Data was obtained from a background questionnaire, from the test items, and from respondent characteristics linked to the labour force data. A typology of skill levels¹⁴ yielded results which placed 7% of the population at Level 1 (cannot read), 9% at level 2 (reads simple words only), 22% at level 3 (reads simple sentences only), and 62% at level 4 (adequate reading skills).
- f) In the United States, two further skill assessments have been commissioned. One commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labour will look at the literacy skills of three populations at the margins of the labour force: applicants for unemployment insurance, job applicants at the U.S. employment service, and job trainees under the JTPA program. The other involves a national adult assessment, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. In both instances, the NAEP team at Educational Testing Services, Princeton, has been awarded the contract. Results from the Labour study will emerge next year, whereas the data collection for the Educational Department's national adult study (NALS) will not occur until 1992.¹⁵

The outputs of many of these studies,¹⁶ while they embody important variations and nuances that are certainly of interest to a wide range of constituencies, essentially point to certain inescapable trends. Stedman and Kaestle summed up these trends in their

exhaustive review of all literacy testing done in the U.S. over the past 100 year period.

They concluded that:

"[It is] reasonable to estimate that about 20% of the adult population, or around 23.5 million people [in the U.S.], have serious difficulties with common reading tasks. Another 10% or so are probably marginal in their functional literacy skills".¹⁷

Their summation is all the more interesting because it was derived before the majority of the most recent direct assessments had even happened. The new results just reaffirm their estimates.

In the current climate, direct skill assessments are, it is argued significantly better¹⁸. And certainly, when they are set beside the self-assessment results of the early census years, or the now tottering viability of educational attainment, they do offer tremendous precision, measurement accuracy, and indeed insight and clarity about the adult literacy issue. The technology of educational testing and sophisticated survey sampling methodology combine into a powerful strategy which allow countries to get hard numbers on adult functional illiteracy.

However, there is a certain cost for this kind of precision. These studies are labour and technology intensive. They rely on expertise in testing and survey methodology which is more developed in some countries than others. They also rely on an infrastructure of empirical social science research both for their guidance and ultimately for their acceptance by relevant authorities and trend setters, such as the media and elites. And with the expense must come an institutional commitment that better literacy statistics are needed, and are worth the attention they will generate.

And so, it can be stated emphatically, that if cost is not critical, and if the best that is available is the goal, and if the institutional momentum exists to get there, direct skill assessment methods are definitely the answer. But, suppose the climate is more tenuous, the resources fewer, and the national literacy momentum still in its infancy. Is there a possible third path between the old proxy dirt road and the new high class direct assessment expressway? Perhaps there is, as we shall explore in the next section.

Statistics Canada's Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA)

Rather than try to canvas the results of all the various direct skill assessments that have been done, we will instead focus on the results of the freshest and most recent data available. In May 1990, Statistics Canada released highlights of the preliminary results of their national literacy survey (LSUDA).

Since the release of the data tape in July we have worked with our colleagues at Statistics Canada and the National Literacy Secretariat to subject it to a thorough analysis. As a point of departure, and for orientation we will present a few basic findings from the survey. Then we will turn immediately to the matter of "strong" correlates, and the implications of these for a re-examination of proxy measures. More extensive information on the Statistics Canada study design and the results are available from our colleagues on request.¹⁹

The Statistics Canada literacy study consisted of interviews administered to individuals in their homes and involved a series of tasks designed to test reading, numeracy, and writing activities commonly encountered in daily life in Canada. The assessment was restricted to Canada's two official languages. A representative sample of 9,455 persons aged 16 to 69, drawn from the Labour Force Survey sample out rotations, attempted some or all of the tasks designed to measure their literacy skills.

Skill levels were defined according to the abilities required to accomplish a variety of activities. For reading, the abilities ranged from locating a word or item in a document (for example, locating the expiry date on a driver's licence) to more complex abilities involving the integration of information from various parts of a document (for example, reading a chart to determine if an employee is eligible for a particular benefit).

The survey employed three questionnaires to profile the characteristics and the literacy skills of Canada's adult population:

- a) a set of "background" questions which gathered information on an individual's socio-demographic characteristics, on parental educational achievement, as well as perceived literacy skills and needs:

- b) a "screening" questionnaire, involving a small number of simple tasks, designed to identify individuals with very limited literacy abilities (those who had very low literacy abilities were not asked to respond to the next questionnaire);
- c) a "main" questionnaire, comprising the majority of the literacy test, aimed at measuring specific reading, writing and numeracy abilities.

The main outcome of the survey was a separate test score for each respondent for reading, writing and numeracy. To aid in the interpretation of these scores, respondents have been categorized into skill levels according to their performance on the test. In the case of reading, the levels are:

- Level 1** - Canadians at this level have difficulty dealing with printed materials. They most likely identify themselves as people who cannot read.
- Level 2** - Canadians at this level can use printed materials only for limited purposes such as finding a familiar word in a simple text. They would likely recognize themselves as having difficulties with common reading materials;
- Level 3** - Canadians at this level can use reading materials in a variety of situations provided the material is simple, clearly laid out and the tasks involved are not too complex. While these people generally do not see themselves as having major reading difficulties, they tend to avoid situations requiring reading;
- Level 4** - Canadians at this level meet most everyday reading demands. This is a large and diverse group which exhibits a wide range of reading skills.

For the purposes of analysis, Canadians at levels 1 and 2 are described as having skills too limited to deal with everyday reading demands. Canadians at level 4 have reading skills sufficient to meet everyday requirements, while those at level 3 have a reading proficiency enabling them to handle reading demands within a more limited range. Figure 1 provides the raw results of the LSUDA reading skill test for the Canadian population distributed across the four categories of reading skill levels. Sixty-two percent

have reading skills deemed adequate for daily requirements (level 4) while 38% do not (levels 1, 2 and 3 combined).

Figure 2 provides an overview of the reading results as distributed by provinces. Interesting differences show up, and there is a smooth shift to stronger skills from the east coast to the west coast. While there has been much speculation as to why this pattern exists, no clear answers are yet available. We suggest that income levels may explain the variations as well as provincial age structures and the proportion foreign-born in different provinces, but other hypotheses are also possible.

Figure 3 provides a snapshot of reading skill levels by age cohorts. While it is clear that the population over 45 years of age has poorer reading skills, it is also evident that even those aged 16-24 have substantial numbers at level two and three functioning. For young individuals, some of whom may have just left the school system, this is not an encouraging statistic.

Reading Skill Levels and Educational Attainment

We will turn now to the heart of our concerns, proxy measures of literacy. Figure 4 presents the relationship between reading skill levels and educational attainment. The majority of Canadians with no schooling (68%), have level 1 reading skills. If you recall, these people, for the most part, cannot read at all. Another 17% and 6% of these people have levels 2 and 3 reading skills respectively. This leaves only 9% of people with no schooling at level 4. Because the traditional proxy method would result in all of those with no schooling being labelled "basic illiterates", and because this label suggests that these people have no literacy skills at all, the false labelling using education levels could be as high as 32%, i.e. all of those with no formal schooling at levels 2, 3 and 4.

As for those with elementary (or first level) education, at least 12% would be falsely labelled as functionally illiterate, since this percentage has level 4 reading skills. If we include those in level 3 who are able to read simple material which is familiar to them, the false labelling could be as high as 41% for those with elementary education.

Figure 5 provides more insights into the adequacy of education as a surrogate measure of literacy²⁰. In this diagram, education is grouped in the same way it has been previously collapsed by researchers to measure literacy, with "grade 4 or less" used to indicate "basic illiteracy", "grades 5-8" to indicate "functional illiteracy", and "grade 9 or more" to indicate "literacy". When cross-classified with the LSUDA reading skill levels, it becomes clear that as many as 44% of those who would by traditional methods be labelled "basic illiterates" would be falsely labelled. As for functional illiteracy, using grades 5-8 to label people as such could also result in false labelling 44% of the time. Moreover, 30% and 14% of those who have grades 5-8 as their highest level of educational attainment, have levels 3 and 4 reading skills, respectively.

Things become even more fuzzy when we consider those with high school education. Using the traditional proxy, all of those with grade nine or higher levels of education are assumed to be literate. Yet, according to Figure 5, as many as 31% would be falsely labelled by this method since this percentage of people with "grade nine or more" education have less than level 4 reading skills. Turning back to Figure 4, you can see that the disparity between the traditional proxy method and actual test results is even higher when we consider those with only some high school education; less than half (48%) of these people have level 4 reading skills. This suggests that if we continue to use education as a surrogate measure of literacy, a level of education higher than grade 9 should likely be used, particularly in those countries, provinces, or states where the high school completion rate is low. Since 70% of those in Canada with at least a high school (or secondary school) diploma (which normally means at least grade 12 education) appear to have adequate reading skills, it seems that this level of schooling should be seriously considered as a new standard for assuming literacy skill levels adequate enough to meet the everyday requirements of life in industrial societies such as Canada.

Revising our educational cut off point such that we assume adequate literacy skills at grade 12 would still make education the best proxy measure of literacy to date, despite its imperfections. The correlation between the LSUDA reading skill levels and educational attainment is a strong .59 gamma coefficient (an ordinal measure of association).* However, there are other possible surrogate measures, such as self-assessment, which could be perfected or used in combination with education levels to produce even better accuracy.

Reading Skill Levels and Self-Assessment

One of the questions posed on the LSUDA survey was this: "On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, how would you rate your reading and writing skills in English (or French)?" Figure 6 displays the results of this question cross-tabulated with the respondents' actual reading skill levels, as determined through the test results. Seventy-two percent of those who rated their literacy skills as "poor" have level 1 reading skills; only 3.5% of these people actually have level 4 reading skills. The low end of the scale, therefore appears to be better than the traditional education surrogate which classifies correctly the "basic illiterates" only 56% of the time.

At the other end of the self-assessment scale, 76% of people who rated their literacy skills as "excellent" have adequate reading skills (level 4), as do 70% of people who rated their skills as "very good". These two points on the self-assessment scale appear to be as accurate, if not more accurate, than the education surrogate, which correctly labels only 69% of those in the "literate" category.

About half of those who assessed their skills in the middle of the self-assessment scale ("good"), have level 4 reading skills. A similar percentage of these people have less than a high school diploma. These results suggest that a combination of education and self-assessment could produce a very strong combined proxy measure of literacy.

The ambiguous point on the self-assessment scale appears to be the category which we have labelled "fair". Test results are such that these people are distributed roughly equally across the four reading skill levels. Sixty-nine percent of people who assessed their literacy skills as "fair" have less than a high school diploma. This again suggests that a revised educational surrogate (i.e. high school diploma cut-off) in combination with self-assessment could produce an excellent proxy indicator of adult literacy.

* It is as high as .83 using the following three categories of education: (1) none, (2) elementary, and (3) high school or more. It was .67 for using (1) less than grade 5, (2) grades 5-8, (3) some high school and (4) high school diploma or more.

A gamma coefficient of .46 for the relationship between self-assessment and the LSUDA reading skill levels indicates that with further experimentation and refinement, self-assessment could either alone or in combination with other measures, become an excellent surrogate measure of literacy skills. There is also a great deal of potential for subsequent refinement of the wording and phrasing of the self-assessment question and of the response categories offered.

Reading Skill Levels by Frequency of Reading

On the LSUDA survey questionnaire, respondents were asked how often they read newspapers, magazines or books. Figure 7 presents the results cross-classified with the LSUDA reading skill levels. While the relationship between frequency of reading and literacy skill levels is weaker than any of the others presented here (with a gamma coefficient of .33), we have placed it after self-assessment for reasons which will become evident shortly.

After the LSUDA data were collected, some preliminary research was commissioned on the development of a reading activity index.²¹ What was learned through the analysis of several data sets, some now outdated, is that the frequency of reading books is potentially the single best indicator of literacy (as determined by a factor analysis) - in some ways, even better than education. The frequency of magazine reading also loaded reasonably well in the factor analysis, though not better than education, and in marked contrast, newspaper reading loaded very poorly. Regarding the latter, we learned that newspaper reading is much like television viewing and radio use. The LSUDA results confirm that for radio use and television viewing, everybody does it and does it often, regardless of literacy level, therefore the correlations are weak. These results suggest that the reason our measure of reading as depicted in Figure 7, is not associated more strongly with the LSUDA reading skill levels is that the association has been dampened by the inclusion in the reading question of too many sources and types of reading materials, newspapers in particular. Hence, the frequency of book reading, is also, we believe, a potentially powerful surrogate measure of literacy. This potential is reflected in the relationship between frequency of visits to the library and reading skill levels (see Figure 8). The gamma coefficient is the same as that for self-assessment, .46.

Reading Skill Levels and Self-Assessment of Workforce Literacy Skills

Respondents were asked after answering some questions on their present or last job, whether or not they thought their reading skills were adequate for that job. Specifically the question was as follows: "Do you feel your reading skills in English (French) are adequate for this job?"

Figure 9 presents the results of this question cross-classified with the reading skill levels, which have been collapsed for the sake of simplicity into inadequate skills (levels 1 to 3), and adequate skills (level 4). Only 30% of people who self-reported that their reading skills were adequate for their job actually tested as inadequate in reading, while a substantial 70% had adequate reading skills. On the other hand, 79% of those who self-reported that their skills were inadequate for their job did in fact have inadequate reading skills; only 21% did not.

Again, Canadian adults prove to have a good subjective self-understanding of the limits of their reading skill levels. And again, we have another strong proxy measure which would be particularly useful for measuring workforce literacy.

Another potentially valuable surrogate measure of workforce literacy, particularly for those countries interested in strengthening the competitiveness of their workforce, is the following question posed to respondents: "Do you feel your reading skills in English (French) are limiting your job opportunities?"

As Figure 10 demonstrates, 71% of people who self-reported that their reading skills are limiting their job opportunities do in fact have inadequate reading skills. A similar percentage (73%) of people who reported that their reading skills are not limiting their job opportunities have adequate reading skills.*

Reading Skill Levels and Other Proxy Indicators

Other indicators which we have looked at that have produced good results in determining literacy levels are as follows: whether or not one has ever had a learning disability; the frequency which one writes letters; the respondents' level of personal

satisfaction with his/her reading skills; whether the respondent thinks his/her literacy skills are adequate for everyday life; and whether the respondent is required to read various types of materials on the job (eg. letters, blueprints, manuals, reports, list, forms and so forth).

Regarding learning disabilities, the survey collected information on several different types of disabilities (eg. learning problems, speech disabilities, sight problems and so forth). These disability-related questions may be combined in the future to provide a single disability indicator to correlate with literacy. Other strong correlates of literacy which have surfaced are mothers' educational attainment; though this factor probably affects literacy by conditioning or determining a respondents' educational attainment; and participation in voluntary and community organizations, and cultural life. We will leave a fuller discussion of these other possible predictors and proxies of literacy for further work.

Suffice it to say at this point, that the LSUDA survey contains a wide range of potential surrogate measures of literacy, alone or in combination with others. The work in surrogate or proxy development has only just begun. We think we have presented enough data here to nonetheless demonstrate that this avenue of research has a great deal of potential.

The next steps will be to combine several of the best proxy indicators into a predictor or factor model using association techniques such as log linear, logit, and principal components analysis. We think, on the basis of the data we have, that a simple proxy model could be constructed which will simulate as much as 90% of the direct testing results. However, let us be very clear, that such modeling can only occur because we have the strength and precision of the direct measures available from the Statistics Canada survey.

* Gamma coefficients were produced for the two workplace surrogates. They are .80 for the relationship between reading skills adequate for job and tested reading skill levels; and .73 for the relationship between the question on whether skills limit job opportunities and the tested reading skill levels. Since in both of the associations, one of the variables is nominal but is treated as binary (0,1), the results of this ordinal level coefficient should be interpreted with caution.

Readers should be cautioned that the correlations we are finding, while strong, may be unique to Canada or may be only generalizable to other countries very similar to Canada. For instance, on the self-assessment scale, the fact that public attention on the adult literacy issue is high in Canada may lead respondents to a more accurate self-rating. We cannot, therefore, assess the face validity of these results for other societies, but some of the hypotheses can be checked with the upcoming U.S. survey results.

Additionally, we should note that some of the proposed proxy measures may be causal or antecedent, such as learning disabilities, while others are correlates and still others result from weak literacy skills, such as library use. It will be very important to explore the differences between causal and correlative factors in the further construction of proxy models.

Summary and Conclusion

Is there life left in proxy measures when we know direct assessments are so much better? Well, it very much depends on the goals one wishes to achieve or advance. And most certainly, it depends on the selection of an appropriate technology of measurement which will fulfill those goals. A recent paper by Dan Wagner²² discusses in detail the issues which researchers must carefully examine in the development and selection of an appropriate measurement technology. Our own experience follows closely on Wagner's suggestion that a mixed technology of direct measures and indirect self-assessment measures will yield very strong results.

In societies where the debate on adult functional illiteracy is well advanced, and where hard precise numbers are needed to inform and fuel that debate, there can be no doubt that direct skill assessment technology, while costly, will succeed. In other societies, where interest in the issues is less developed (or not developed at all), or where the costs of direct assessment seem prohibitive, there are gains to be made both empirically, and from the point of view of advocacy, by carefully re-examining the utility of proxy measures. Such measures could be either derived from the secondary analysis of existing censuses and surveys from various countries, or by commissioning new surveys and analyses using a selection of critical indicators which would constitute the principal components of a rigorous proxy model.

Several options therefore exist at different levels of cost, complexity, and comparability. Secondary analysis of any already available data using existing proxy indicators, similar to those discussed in this paper, would be a start. Next in line would be to use several proxy indicators and add them to other ongoing national surveys. Next would be a mix of proxies and direct assessment measures administered to a small sample in order to check the basic correlations, and then administered to a larger sample using only the best proxy correlates. Even more advanced would be the full scale direct assessment approach using a large sample, with accompanying proxy correlates, such as the Canadian and U.S. studies. And finally, at the highest level would be the integration of methodologies internationally, so that real comparative statistics on adult literacy would be standardized worldwide or at least standardized for the O.E.C.D. member states.

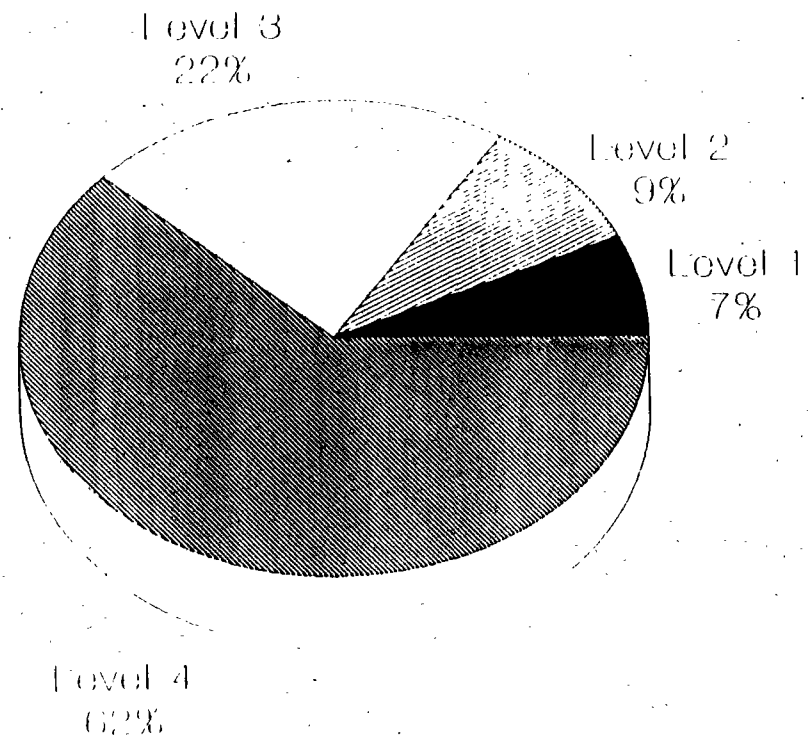
Many industrialized societies are in the grips of an adult literacy crisis, but the rate and speed of its public recognition in each society is highly variable. The institutional will to do something about the problem of adult illiteracy is also quite variable by country. Getting and then keeping adult literacy on the public agenda of many industrialized societies will require that appropriate measurement technologies be available for different societal contexts and circumstances. The development of alternatives in the measurement of adult literacy, so that different technologies are both available and adaptable to specific societal contexts and circumstances, will aid us all. Some of those appropriate alternatives we believe may still reside in proxy measurements and models.

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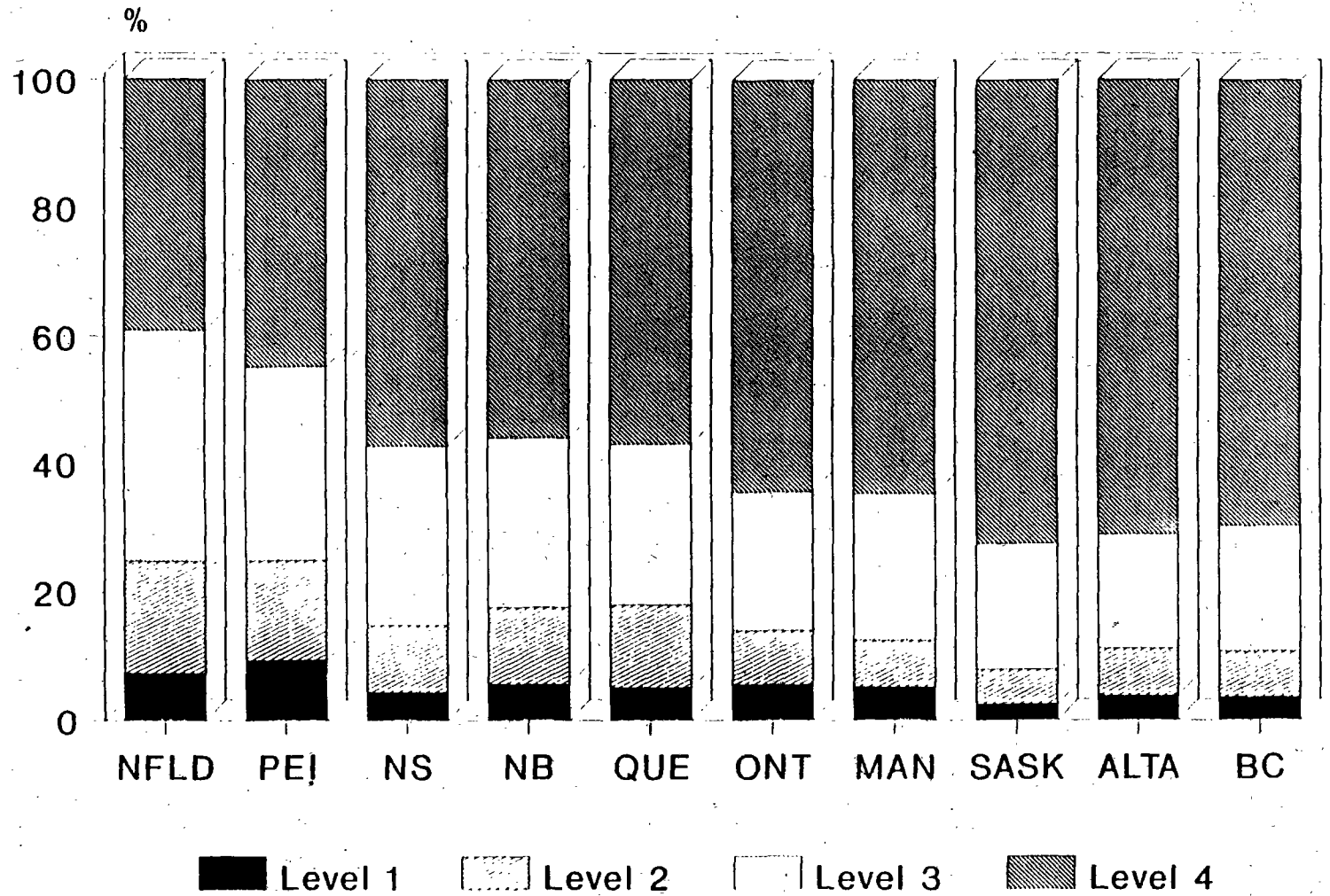
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Reading Skill Levels in Canada



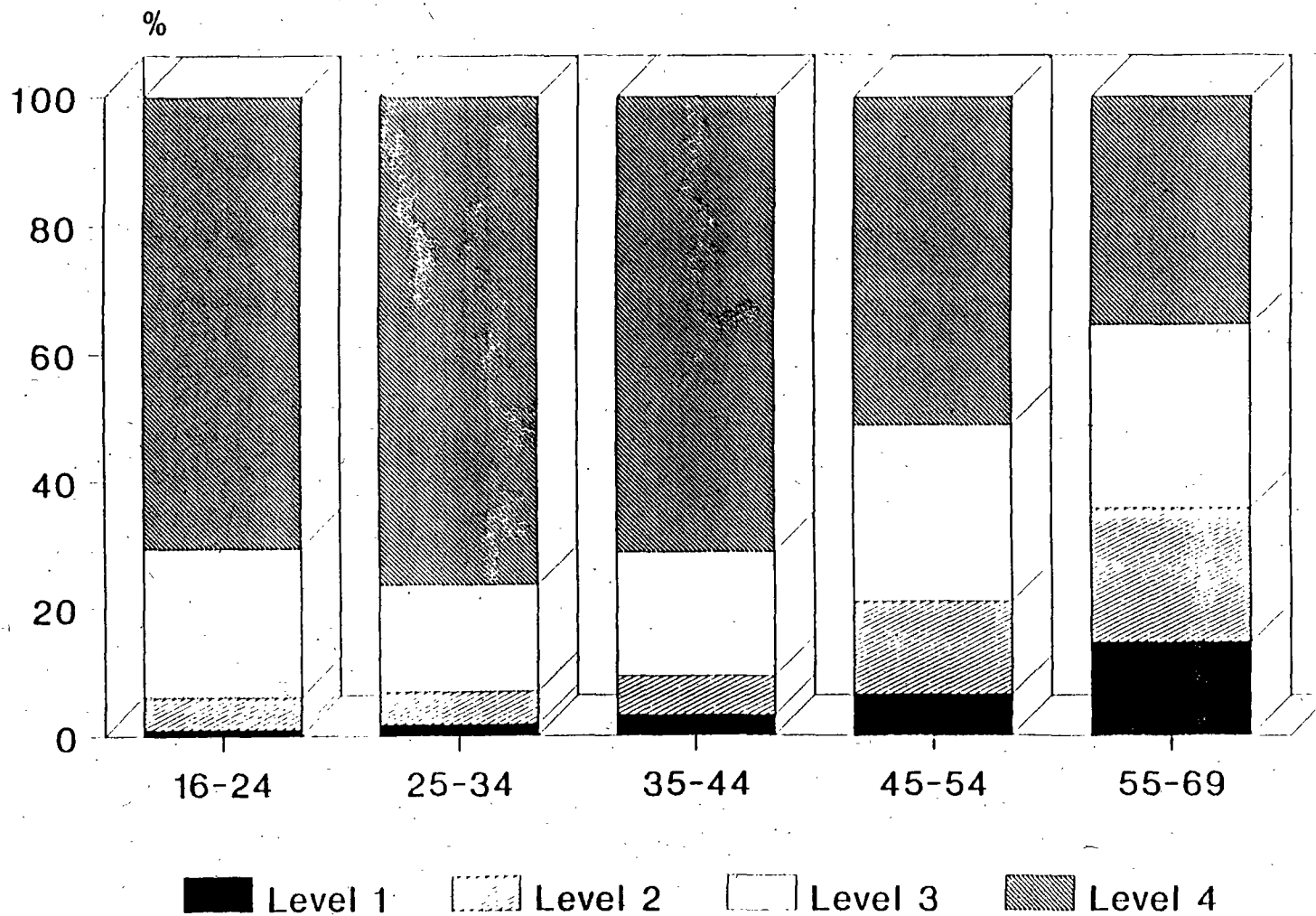
LSUDA Fig.1

Reading Skill Levels by Province



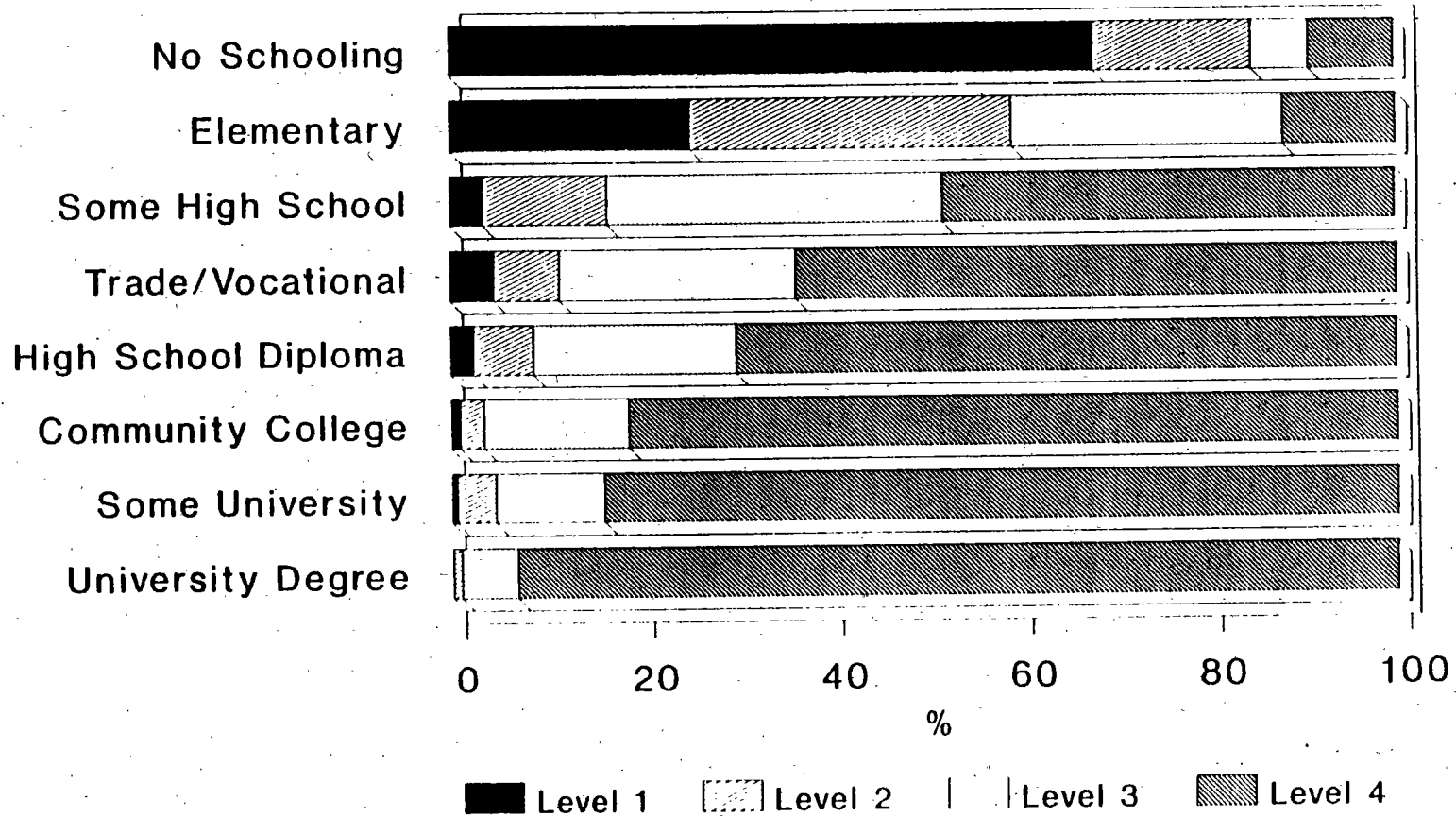
LSUDA Fig.2

Reading Skill Levels by Age Groups



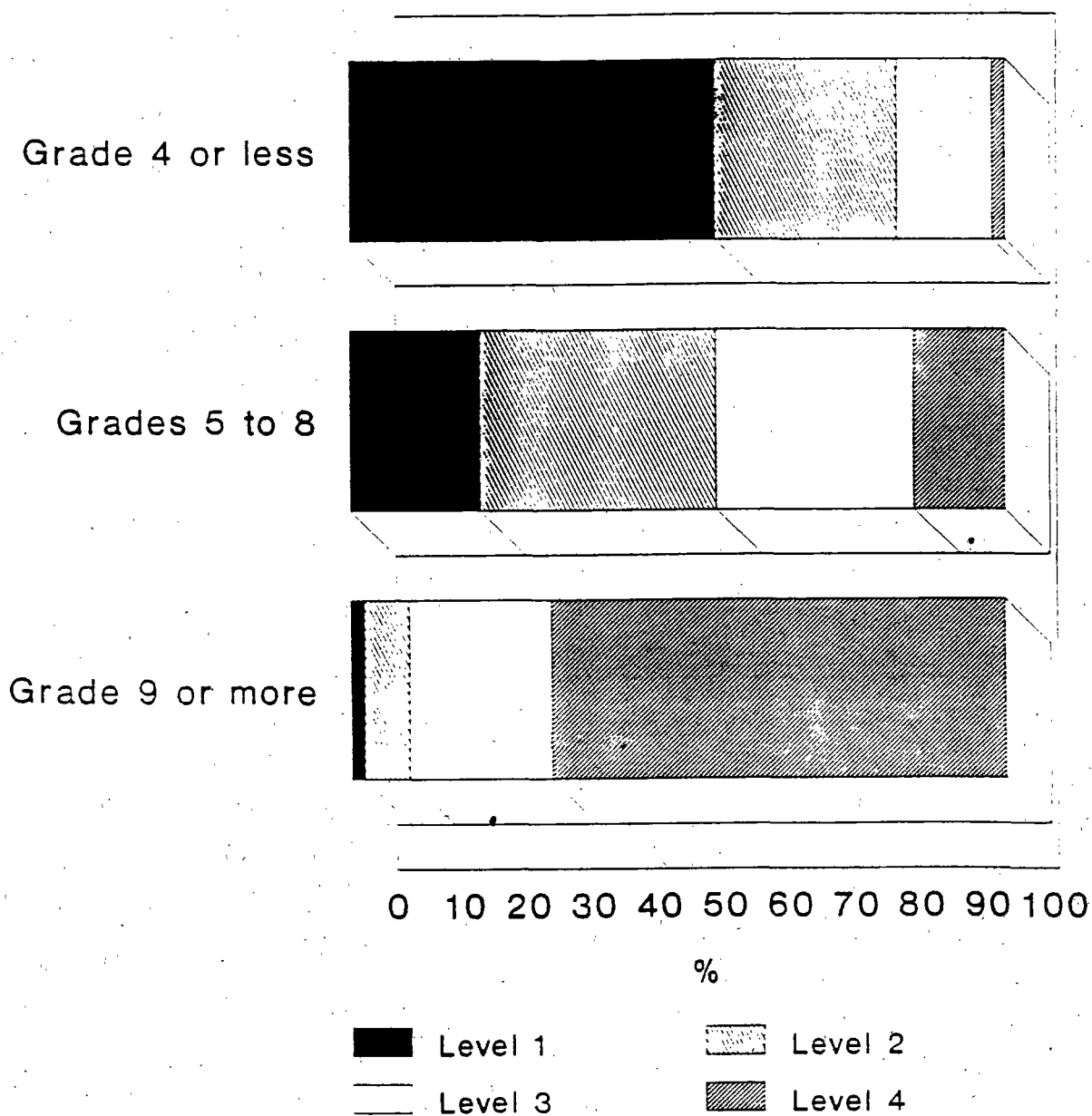
LSUDA Fig.3

Reading Skill Levels by Educational Attainment



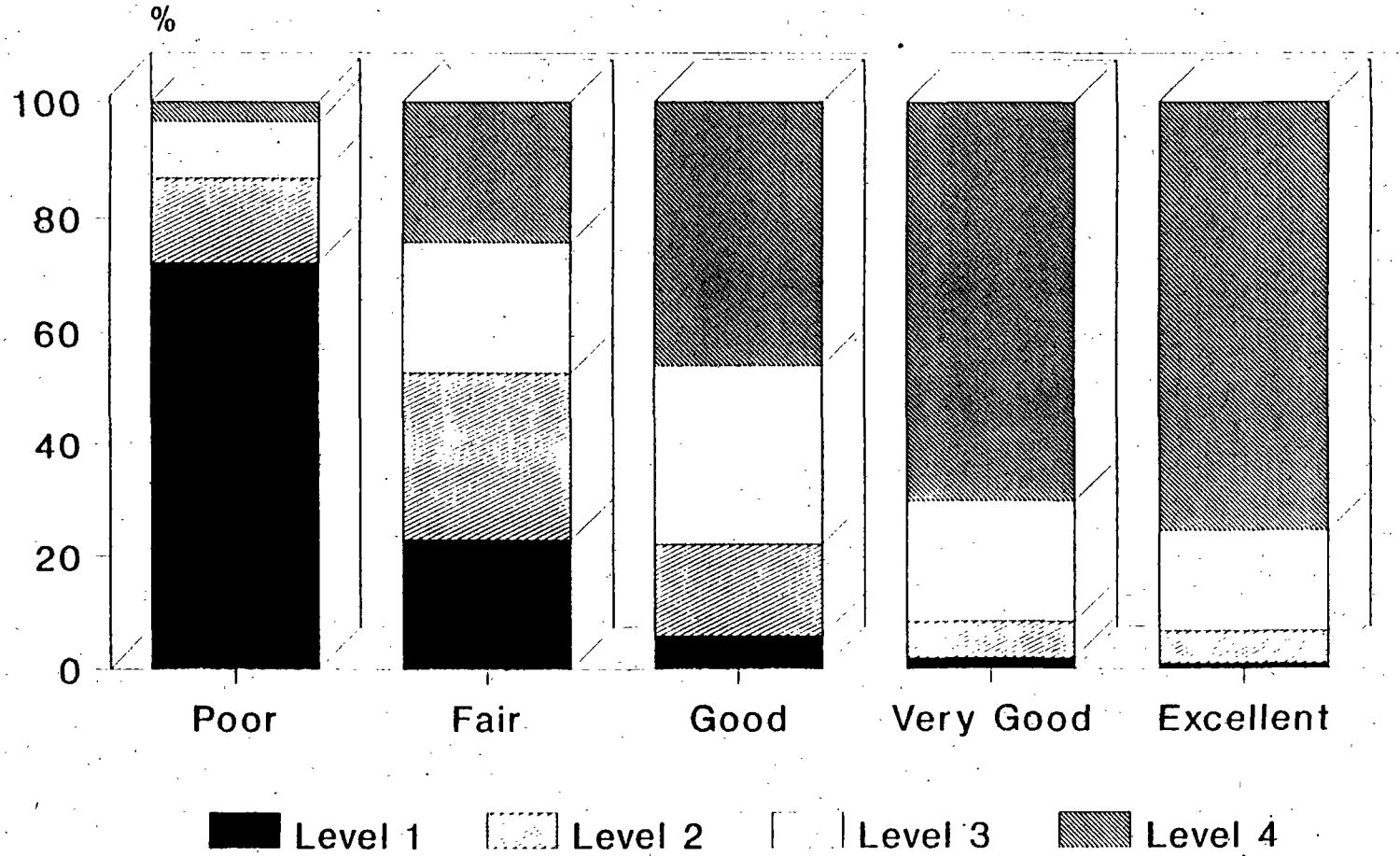
LSUDA Fig.4

Reading Skill Levels and Educational Attainment



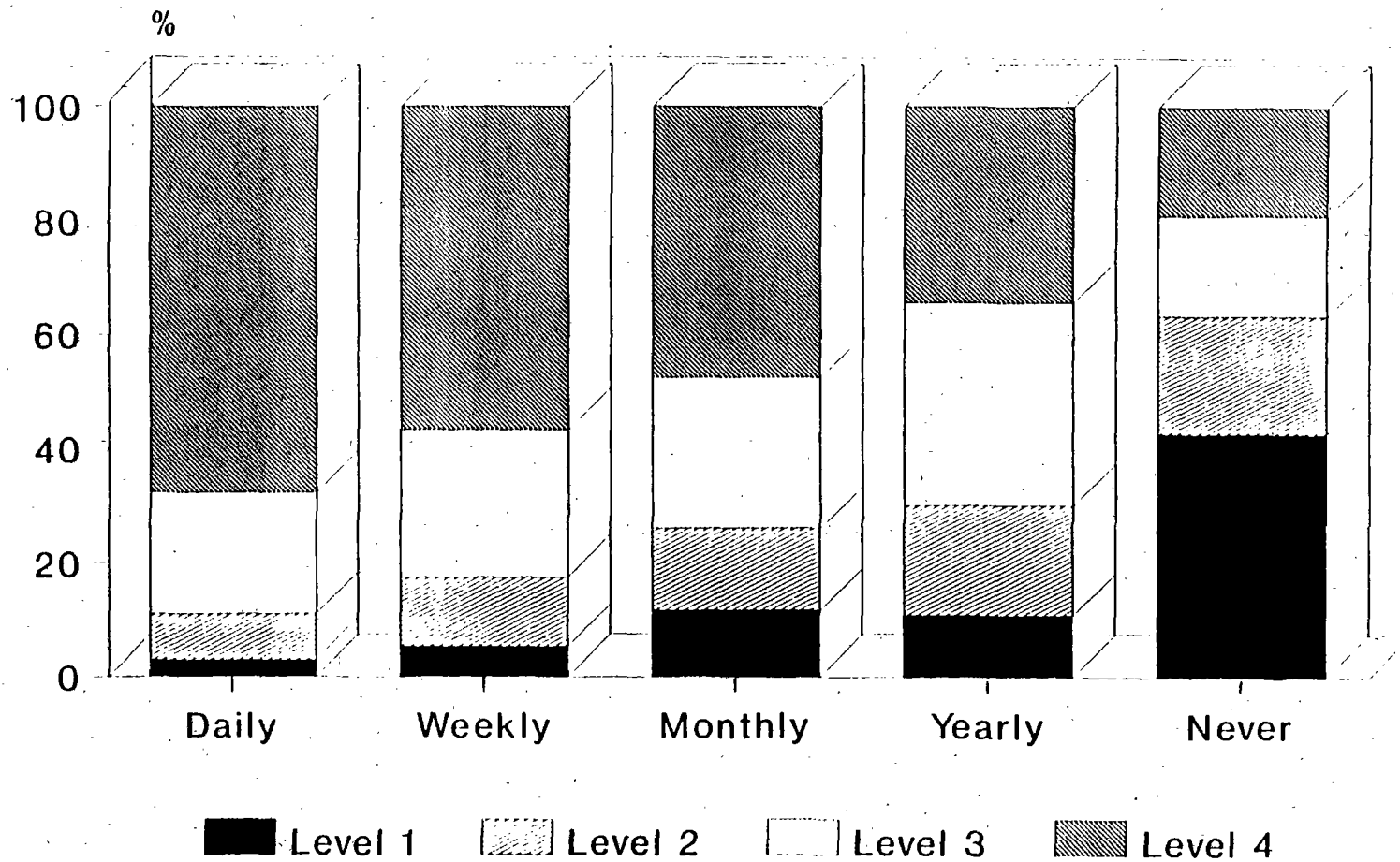
LSUDA Fig.5

Reading Skill Levels by Self Assessment of Reading and Writing Skills

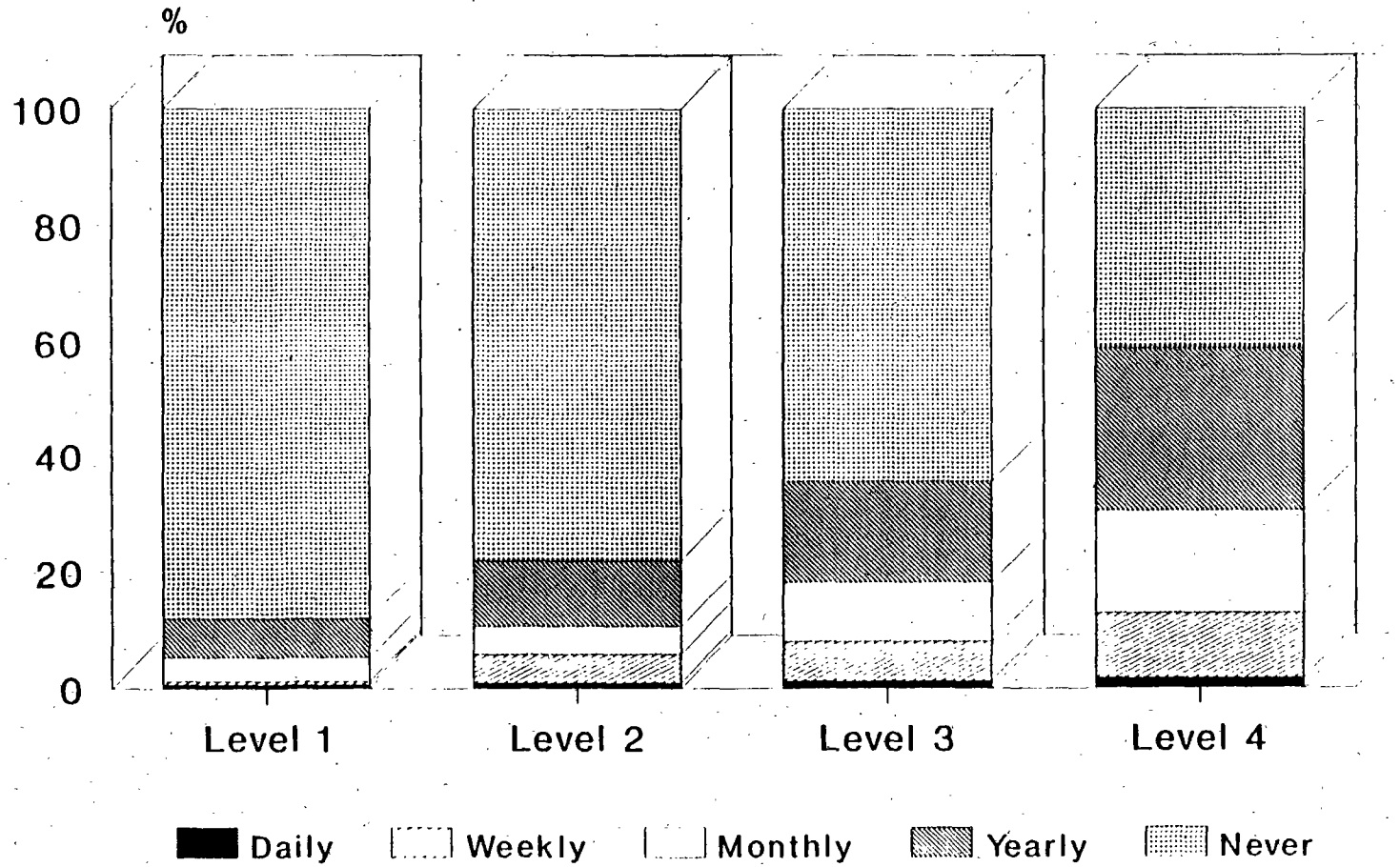


LSUDA Fig.6

Reading Skill Levels by Frequency of Reading Newspapers, Magazines or Books

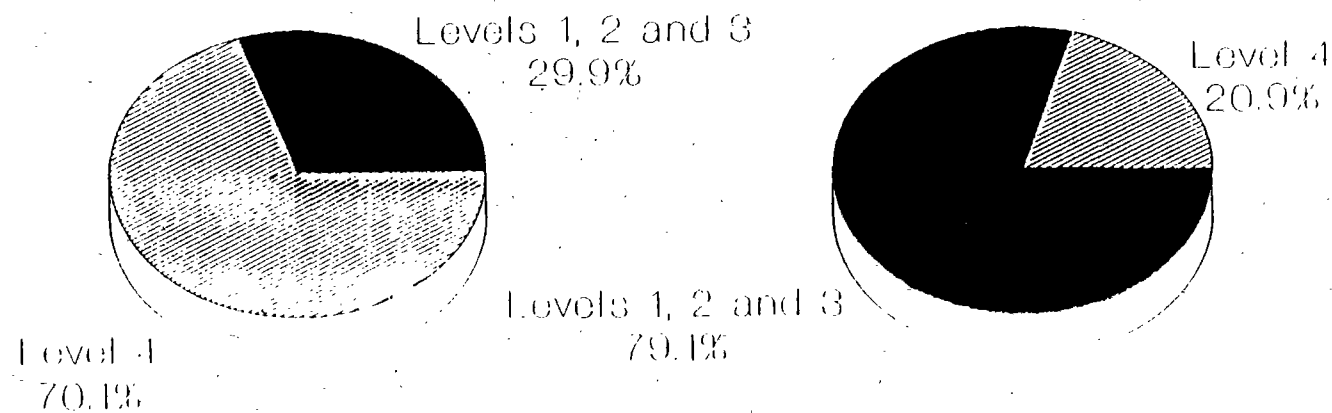


Reading Skill Levels by Frequency of Library Visits



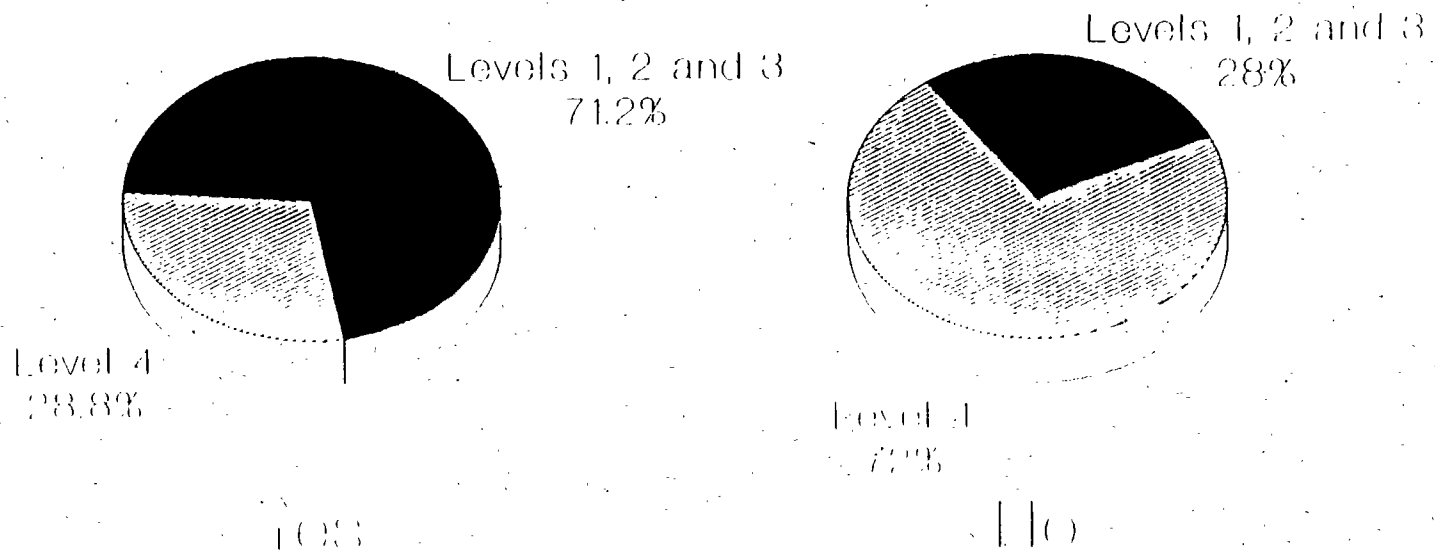
LSUDA Fig.8

Reading Skill Levels by Whether Reading Skills Considered Adequate for Job



Skills Considered Adequate for Job?

Reading Skill Levels by Whether Reading Skills Limit Job Opportunities



Skills Limit Job Opportunities?

ANNEX D

The UIE report on the analysis of the factors
and of the dimensions of Adult Literacy

ILLITERACY: FROM THE MYTH TO THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FACTS

Jean-Paul Hautecoeur
Unesco Institute for Education
November 1990

INTRODUCTION

A seminar took place at the Unesco Institute for Education in Hamburg in November 1990 on the subject of illiteracy in Eastern and Western Europe. The two main questions discussed were the explanation for the problem or the phenomenon in the various countries and the methods of measuring it, starting from the recent inquiry made by the Canadian authorities.

The following text was prepared on the occasion of this seminar. The presupposition on which it is based was as follows: the simple transposition of the problems of illiteracy from West to East, including the methods of measuring it, was false and improper. Mass illiteracy allegedly supported and concealed by former regimes was not necessarily going to be "uncovered" in the East. Civil societies and the new states were not necessarily going to embark on a general mobilization against illiteracy as was the case in numerous Western countries. The struggle with the aftermath of the former regimes would find expression in a different way: more in terms of liberating the means and the content of communication than in terms of "functional competence" or reading levels. Attention would be focussed less on school than on social relations as a whole. The comparison of the two types of history promised to be very stimulating.

The meeting could give rise to other questions. Why has so much been invested in the West in researching and combating illiteracy? How and why did we arrive at that particular interpretation of reality which is generally presented as a given fact to be eliminated? Having deconstructed the myth what common methodological basis can be applied to analyse the different contexts of communication? Instead of trying to establish universal criteria of linguistic competence and apply means of measuring individual competence independent of the contexts of communication, should we not try to achieve better objectivization of the different technological, economic, cultural, social, political and ideological contexts which define the conditions of some practices or other, first collective then individual, in the use of the written word, and which define the value and values attached to the written word?

A report from Romania submitted during the seminar confirms the importance of such a move to be effected in measuring individual competence in a socio-political context, which may radically reverse the sense invested in literacy:

"The refusal of the intruding politics into everyday life and the distortion of the human thinking had been changed into a resolute rejection of the written language, already subjugated by the political power."

César Birzúa: "Illiteracy in Romania, between reality and rhetoric", 1990 (unpublished).

1. THE MYTH

To the question "What is the nature of the problem of illiteracy?" a literate person is tempted to reply: "The naturalization of the problem." That is the reduction of a group of cultural facts concerning the written word to a singular natural phenomenon that can be compared to an illness. It is easy to associate illiteracy, something new and surprising like AIDS, with the stigma of venereal disease. To be less sensational it is compared to blindness, a physiological deficiency, or even an intellectual, motive or behavioural handicap. Illiteracy implies a pathological condition of the physical and psychological being. It calls for treatment. It is medical property.

Illiteracy also opens up the world of make-believe. It is found in modern times like the relic of a previous state of Man - the naive, pre-school child in his nursery environment - or like the relic of a previous state of humanity - the noble savage. (Eric Havelock by the way revives the interest shown by intellectuals in the oral/written question and refers to Jean Jacques Rousseau, (1). The synthesis of the two images is represented by the child savage. Every society has discovered its own perfect example, in the forest, raised by wolves, the antithesis of the city-dweller sporting a briefcase. An object fit for a museum.

Illiteracy even goes beyond the sphere of medicine and ethnography, it approaches the sacred. Not in the tame sense of the term as we know it (the churches and the written religions), but in its primitive sense, magic. It is relegated to the shadows, it presents danger, it threatens evil. It is at the same time attractive and repulsive. Its innocence gives rise to fear. It must be guarded against, hence the campaigns for elimination, the literacy crusades and other mission to exorcise the evil.

This phenomenon has the characteristics of a myth. Roland Barthes saw the myth as the imaginary, magical transmutation of history to nature, or of existence to essence as the phenomenologists called it. In the mythical circle things have the clarity of the essence, they seem to convey meaning on their own. There is no further contradiction, the world regains its unity. Events are replaced by advents, going over to the supernatural. The myth is active. Armed with superhuman strength, it acts as a substitute for history when history is unclear and disruptive. It fills the gaps of indetermination, it recreates the linear unity of time, when time itself appears chaotic.

Illiteracy is endowed with the mythical strength of omnipresence. It has been found in action in all sectors of society:

- in the economy: it would lead to major losses in production, low productivity and poor product quality, industrial accidents, etc.;
- in the social sector: it is associated with the increase in criminality, disease and accidents, with the growing exclusion of new population levels which are becoming younger and younger;
- in the socio-political sector: it is a direct threat to democracy, to national security and national unity. The illiterates form a new "dangerous class";
- in culture: the cultural capital of the nation is threatened with degradation owing to the devaluation of the written word, the schools crisis, the failed cultural integration of immigrants and the competition of imported values;
- in private life: illiterate families and individuals display certain psychological disturbances which affect their identity, interfere with their role and lead to isolation and behaviour characterised by failure, aggressiveness, etc.

Polls taken in several countries confirm that illiteracy* is seen as a national scourge. In the United States, for example, it recently occupied third place after drugs and AIDS. In Canada it took second place after alcohol at the wheel. The results of national inquiries corroborate the certainty of the existence and the extent of the evil. We are confronted with a phenomenon of the masses and not of minorities, as was the case about ten years ago: 60 million in the United States, one adult in four in Canada, one in five or six in central Europe, the figures for southern Europe being undoubtedly higher. Those for eastern Europe are not yet available. It may be expected that certain countries attribute alcoholism, economic collapse and socio-political disturbances to illiteracy, a reality concealed by former regimes. Would the northern European countries and Japan be spared? - Sweden, protected since the Reformation by the religion of the Book which would have united Church, State and family in the exorcism of evil; Japan, by what grace soever, or because the same inquiries were not conducted there.

The subject is fascinating, the figures rise. Illiteracy which is also termed new illiteracy or secondary illiteracy in Europe, functional illiteracy in North America would reach the silent majority of television viewers and even, according to Richard Hoggart, 90% of the population of the

*Translator's note: The term "illettrisme" is used in France, whereas the term "analphabétisme" is more common in other French-speaking countries.

industrialized countries who would not have learned to read, as Caliban says to Prospero in Shakespeare's "The Tempest", except to know how to curse better (2).

The archeology and the comparative history of the contemporary myth of illiteracy remain to be done. The task is being undertaken by various researchers in several disciplines (for example: Harvey Graff, The Literacy Myth, 1979). The questions of interest to us now are of two orders:

- the deconstruction of the myth: when, how, by whom and why was it created? Where is it used and what for? "Why was this disease invented?", ask J.F.Lae and P. Noisette. "Why are so many doctors in such a hurry, so verbose about their treatment and so silent on the effects of their treatment?"
- the reconstruction of the facts by exploring the problems concealed by the myth, problems of method but also problems of ethics and action: the definitions of the object or objects of inquiry and their extent, the dichotomy between illiteracy and literacy which raises ethical problems beyond those of taxonomy, the question of priority of action, taking into account "reasons of state", the demands of civil society, the rights and expectations of the individual.

The range of these questions is vast, especially from an international point of view. It will suffice here to clarify some of them and to indicate some ways of approaching the task.

2. DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH

The myth of illiteracy and its deliverance by universal literacy was built up by an eclipse of history. Its deconstruction calls for historiographic research on contemporary history which would start after the last World War. It seems in fact that the current problem of mass illiteracy was raised in public in the United States during the War by President Roosevelt. Shortly after the War UNESCO (1947) was founded with the task of combating illiteracy in the world. It is worth noting that this mission oriented towards the Third World soon formed a concept of its operations (1956) with the help of a notion of American creation and usage: functional literacy ...

Kenneth Levine notes that until the mid 1960's the orthodox line was to talk of illiteracy in terms of an epidemic, like malaria; it was turned into a sort of cultural pathology capable of being completely eliminated applying a standard treatment of education: the one applied in the northern countries, that is universal primary education (3).

The discussion on illiteracy, even its measurement, (1947 census in

the USA) is therefore already half a century old. A myth creates the illusion of something new. When it becomes old it erodes, the rituals, celebrations and discussions must be renewed. This is what happened in the 1980's with the symbolic consecration in 1990 of International Literacy Year. But why was it recreated using the same symbolics?

Eric Havelock points to fertile ground, based on his experience which seems to have been shared by other eminent intellectuals of the time. He locates the interest borne by the intellectual community in the West in the question of the relationship between the written word and the spoken word in the post-War years. A particular occurrence is said to have opened up this field of research which has since become very fertile: the extensive use of radio during the War, in particular to pick up the messages of Hitler.

The power of orality promoted by the media was thus rediscovered with new communication technology. The experience would have been fascinating, but it gave rise to fear. And one of the questions it has raised since then concerns the modernity of the written word, its future in communications, the effects of its dreaded decline on written culture, the dangers for humanity. M. McLuhan, C. Lévi-Strauss, J. Goody, W. Ong have spoken out on this research which was done at the same time as the first literacy programmes.

The First World War with correspondence, mail, popular newspapers and written national propaganda, established the importance of the written word. The Second World War rather signalled its possible decline, a very menacing cultural change since national order in each territory had hitherto been maintained by the written culture and the institutions whose function was to preserve it, develop it and transmit it. Radio, as well as television, the telephone, microcomputing today indicate profound changes in the ways of communication of an era, but they themselves are obviously not the only cause of these changes. However, these signals assume the value of symbols since they threaten the written order: by technology, a daring leap into the unknown (G. Orwell: 1984) or by the return to orality with its catastrophic primitive implications (one thousand million adult illiterates in the world, a return of illiteracy in the industrialized countries).

In this research into the origins of the myth of illiteracy one must go back much further. A "modern" trace of it can be found, for example, as early as 1855 in New England where they started to measure the literacy level of the population because of the large numbers of Irish, Catholic and illiterate immigrants who posed a threat to the established order. The terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" probably date from this time and from these

events. (It would be useful to make a historiographic comparison of the first usages of the term in different socio-linguistic contexts).

What arguments, what social groups have contributed most to the construction of illiteracy as we know it today? Each national configuration is different, but taking a transnational cross-section it is possible to identify the key groups:

- a group from the field of science, in particular educational psychologists, reading specialists, exam result analysts, sociologists. They provided scientific evidence in favour of the theory of individual or cultural deficit;
- institutions and networks specialized in literacy programmes: UNESCO, national and international voluntary associations in the struggle against illiteracy, government organisations;
- the schools sector, since the identification of the failure at school and its special treatment; also the adult education sector from basic training to vocational training;
- pressure groups from the business sector (paper, books, printing), cultural industries, the service industries for the written word, the press;
- intellectual writers who have found their vocation and their public in the struggle against illiteracy, the denouncement of the decline of national culture, etc.;
- politicians, statesmen and stateswomen who have introduced the subject into legislation and national priorities;
- militants and cultural action groups (counter-cultural) for the defence of the rights of minorities;
- the social-work sector, especially its community fringe, often in conjunction with the previous group;
- journalists, film-directors, professionals in written and spoken information

The list is by no means complete.

These groups and individuals have each produced a wide range of different arguments, sometimes opposing and contradictory. But they have come together in associations and coalitions, they have participated in the same events, they have been brought together in national and international movements, the effect of which has been to neutralize opposition and to overcome their differences. They have constructed a syncretic rationality of illiteracy which achieves consensus in the task to be performed. A macro-discourse which a growing public expects from its popular ideologists and which is being performed in public, from the local level to the international

level. A discourse confirmed by the images and testimonies of these new actors: the illiterates in adversity, in rehabilitation or out of danger. Some of them have found a new role for themselves in these revealing testimonies.

J.F. Lae and P. Noisette observing this movement in France arrive at this question on the reality of illiteracy: "A phenomenon is clearly emerging: from diverse (identifiable) places voices are being raised to denounce the "silent scandal" of illiteracy. Is not this very real agreement the most accurate "definition" of the nebulous polymorph of illiteracy, after all?" (4).

However, a wide, relative definition signposts this "nebulous polymorph" which unites practically all of the groups, that of UNESCO (1951): "A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life". In the industrialized countries this person is referred to as a functional illiterate. The difference allows to absorb the objection of universal education. Other semantic contributions, like the famous "continuum" of literacy open wide the demographic pool of illiterates to be enumerated by survey. There will be more and more. In Quebec, for example, from one survey to the other they went from 4% to 28% of the adult population who had serious problems reading and writing. The discourse concerned, which also says that the whole of society is concerned, becomes indignant about underestimates (5).

An initial transnational response has been outlined to the question "why this myth, what is its purpose?". Signs of social change are threatening the written culture, the written order: in the technology of communication (for example, rock: Pink Floyd "The Wall"), in the schools crisis, in the conflicts of cultures due to immigration ("I don't want to read your books, everything is in the Koran" - (6) -) in the daily assessments of the "drop in level" of school students as a product of culture. The conclusion reached is that the written order is under threat.

However, as Jean Hébrard has shown in the case of France, the diagnosis of cultural crisis does not yet explain the "invention of illiteracy", nor the literacy campaigns (7). During the 30 years of growth the subject of illiteracy has not been discussed. Associations have developed and publicised literacy programmes, but limited to the immigrant public. In schools a significant progression of student failure at school had been observed and experiments had already been carried out in special teaching for children with difficulty in learning to read. In sub-proletariat circles

(fourth world) associations had already transformed charity services into cultural action, including literacy programmes. All of these activities, however, were limited and subdued.

In the 1970's the effect of the new situation of economic crisis, industrial transformation, mass unemployment, impoverishment of classes who had hitherto been spared ("nouveaux pauvres") etc., was to bring the questions to the foreground and then to offer training. The school system was publicly chastised for massive student failure. The associations were mobilized to take part in "low level" training schemes. Jean Hébrard theorizes that illiteracy in France was born out of the saturation of training on offer in the late 1970's. A similar analysis has been carried out for Belgium (8). It can also be applied across the board to Canada (9).

By designation according to functional illiteracy it is possible to bring together into one generic concept all sorts of population groups affected by the economic crisis, the schools crisis, migration, drop in social status and exclusion. It channels all of them towards training (through liberal offers up to constraint and legal obligation). For this widescale operation it mobilizes the State, the Church as the case may be, and civil society through its network of associations. Thus it achieves consensus once more in the celebration of the value of the written word which the school system can no longer achieve on its own.

3. THE SOCIAL DEFINITIONS OF ILLITERACY

Criticism of a myth opens the way to multiplicity, differences and contradictions. The objectivation of the illiteracy myth discloses rival discourses. Once having deconstructed the global meaning which imposed the unique as evidence, illiteracy no longer becomes the definition, but the definitions which the social groups give. The facts of illiteracy are constructed in distinct ideologies (the scientific discourses among them), in the interactions of these discourses and in their changes. They are inseparable from the values which the groups and the individuals invest in them and from the price of literacy on the socio-economic market. (The state of the economy is very favourable at the moment, as we have seen: these values are increasing).

What are the main points of view on the said facts of illiteracy? Four instances have been identified: the intellectuals or the researchers, the major institutions who have the authority to define the subject, the organizations and the literacy professionals, the individuals and groups

identified as illiterate.

The scholarly discourse on illiteracy can be divided briefly into three: the psychology of individual abilities to read and communicate, the historical sociology of literacy, anthropology and the sociolinguistics of linguistic practices in different cultures. This division according to discipline comes within the framework of a history of the authorized discourse on illiteracy: the psychopathology of reading, a dominant discourse about twenty years ago when the questions of illiteracy were linked to failure at school, has since been faced with stiff competition from sociology, linguistics, anthropology and history which have considerably enlarged the problems of illiteracy by criticising for the most part the clinical reduction to reading capacity deficiency (10).

The psychological discourse is developed around a key term: competence in reading activities or in written communication. Its place of observation has mainly been in schools where children have learning difficulties. It spread to industry. What skills are required for what type of jobs? How does one select suitable staff? How can one improve output in reading and communication? The cognitivist and behaviourist theories have given a scientific basis to the diagnoses of individual illiteracy. Their application in schools and in industry have been largely popularized for the technical treatment of deficiencies or deviations measured by tests with reference to a normal, average or ideal model. An example of this technical reading of illiteracy is given in the report on illiteracy in France, Des illettrés en France, with the scale of reading levels (11).

The sociological and historical discourse deals with illiteracy in terms of social inequality and differentiated cultural integration between the written and the spoken word. If writing is included in communication technology, its usage and social distribution are not translated in terms of individual technical competence, but rather in terms of accessibility to the written word. Illiteracy exists to varying degrees in the marginal social groups or those excluded from the exchanges in which the majority of the population participates. It is only real in a multidimensional context of social, economic and linguistic relationships which are also at work in school. One cannot isolate its "treatment" from a change in conditions which ensure its reproduction, conditions generally referred to as exclusion and poverty.

The culturalist discourse tends to reject the use of the negative

concept of illiteracy. This use characterises an ethnocentric and imperialist thought ("colonial" according to B. Street - (12)) which proceeds by negating the culture of the other in order to assimilate it better. The dichotomy literacy/illiteracy is replaced by notions of cultural diversity and use of orality and writing. The practices of communication lie within specific cultural areas, that is values and symbols which give them meaning, rather than first of all on a scale of performance. The effectiveness and functionality are also symbolic. For instance, in a working-class circle, as in a gang of young people, orality may exert itself on the way of rejecting the dominant written culture, like a positive value and a mark of identity. In a recent doctoral thesis in Quebec, H el ene Blais substituted the concept of allography for that of illiteracy by proposing to change viewpoint in order to discover different ways of using language (13).

These three types of discourse are less exclusive than complementary. But they differ from each other with regard to their socio-political positions. The psychological discourse presents itself as an experimental approach, neutral in terms of values, apolitical. The sociological and culturalist discourses are seen within the framework of historical and contextual conflict. They intervene to change an order of discourse, social relations and powers at the origin of downgrading into illiteracy. Is there any linguistic competence independent of the history and context of the individual? Is illiteracy anything other than a historical fact, thus changing, something other than a social construction?

A second place for the definition of illiteracy is spread mainly over three social sectors: school, industry and commerce, the cultural sector. The first two are greatly normative. The levels of literacy are measured and the individuals classified according to criteria, values, school exercises. Literacy is compulsory, even after school age. The ideology of the "second chance" conceals the inevitable new beginning. One has to be able to read and write. If one does not achieve this, one has to believe in it. One of the functions of the school is to instil the ideology of literacy throughout the entire national territory.

The industrial and commercial sector, for the latter especially in the book and written press market, reinforces the ideology of the saving power of literacy. But it defines literacy competence in technical terms of functional capacity to its own ends - productivity and profit. Illiteracy is presented in industry as a process of technological downgrading. This

technicist ideology conceals a key function of the proof of written competence in industry: selecting personnel according to the cultural values of the company.

Intellectuals (writers, journalists) also have a key role in the social definition of illiteracy. They may intervene to support the two previous discourses, or to criticise from an elitist point of view (for example R. Hoggart and H.M. Enzensberger), the culture of the masses or to criticise the elitism and dominant culture which give rise to structural illiteracy.

Schools, industry and their affiliated ideologists campaign for literacy, supported if their voices are loud enough by the power of politics. Sector-based discourses are fused into a national unitarian discourse with either technocratic, populist, or charitable implications etc. Literacy campaigns or fights against illiteracy are thus institutionalized, indeed legalized.

The professional and voluntary environment of literacy is heterogeneous. The general discourses it holds on illiteracy reproduce in whole or in part the discourses already mentioned. Certain organizations however make critical evaluations of their public and their literacy activities in contrast to the ideas received. Here are two examples, extracts from the experience of PLAN ("Push Literacy Action Now") in the United States and from "La Boîte à lettres" in Quebec:

"The present discourse leads one to believe that the problem has one solution... The underlying reality is very different:

- the total number of adults with inadequate schooling netted each year by all the programmes does not exceed 10 million;
- more than 50% of these people escape the net within a period from 6 months to a year, too little time to really learn anything;
- generally speaking, the people enrolled in the programmes scarcely represent the population with inadequate schooling as a whole...

There is very little data to support the so-called "positive results" of these programmes... What does exist is hardly encouraging... To call into question and to doubt the methods for counting "illiterates", the definition of illiteracy, the use of the results of studies and the reaction of the United States to their so-called "crisis" does not mean to deny the fact that in the United States there are millions of adults with inadequate schooling who need our

help... To reduce the problem to a lack of knowledge of reading and writing is an over-simplification of the complex problem and tends to impose solutions based on the notion of "teaching the people to read and write". (14)

- "Literacy education for young people is an extremely difficult task... Not one young person has left the "Boite à lettres" being able to read and write adequately...
- Young people are not easy to recruit and they readily abandon the literacy education process. For every one young person who learns to read and write there are perhaps seven or more who reject it.
- Young illiterates often have urgent needs to fulfil other than that of literacy... The two most important needs are still work and social and emotional relationships (the same as for the rest of us)... We are dispensing knowledge which many do not regard as essential to their life, knowledge relegated to oblivion by other more immediate needs, knowledge which is transmitted slowly and with difficulty across certain cultural barriers..." (15).

A final piece of evidence, from the experience of Alpha Mons-Borinage in Belgium, attacks head-on the attribute of illiteracy as a construction of literacy education professionals:

" On a quantitative level we are only reaching few people in total and even the majority of those whom we may think are affected by our action are completely disinterested. To put it bluntly, the "illiterates" do not wish to be taught to read and write. It is not their plan, it is ours. And those we reach least are precisely those who, according to us, should be reached as a matter of priority (the most excluded).

On a qualitative level the offer of literacy education entails a negative view of the public concerned. The people are defined by a lack, although they are rich in culture and experience, in reflection and in dreams. Even if their life, their culture is curtailed, marked with exploitation and exclusion, their reality is as complex as any human reality, they have a history for which they themselves are responsible. The negative view induced from the process of literacy may maintain and strengthen the exclusion it claims to eradicate or reduce". (16)

The closer one gets to the presumed reality of illiteracy, the more complex and problematic this reality appears to be and even foreign to the people and the circles affected. Also the more it seems that literacy education is clearly not the solution to problems whether they exist in comparison with other written practices, or do not have priority, or definitely do not exist for the individuals to whom they are attributed.

The final group from whom one could expect a discourse on illiteracy are the "illiterates". Now they do not exist as an established group, but as clients for literacy education. Illiteracy is not an identity in itself. The attribute is so disdainful that one cannot identify with it, even if one has the "symptom" which seems to meet the minimum consensus of the specialists: difficulties in reading and writing! Again one must have had this experience and realize that these difficulties were harmful. One must attach a minimum of value to the written word. One must live in an environment where the written word demands more than the fortuitous decoding of an ordinary message (which is sometimes referred to as survival literacy). Or one must enter a literacy education institution by choice, by constraint or by obligation with the label "illiterate", in a very ill-assorted group with only thing in common: this abstract deficiency in the written word attributed by the institution to its clients.

It does happen that individuals find their bearings, accept this new status and willingly represent it in front of the others. Those people have really become "illiterates". There are some who play this role in the past once they have been rehabilitated. Their "success stories" are in demand. There are some who reject the label and the status, so they are often never seen again. The latter are marked as "drop out" cases, typical behaviour it seems of "non-motivated illiterates". Thus the decline that they evidently rejected is reconfirmed.

The social definitions of illiteracy seen as a whole are more than diverse, they are contradictory. Reality designated as such on the basis of various social positions is more than complex, it is paradoxical. Illiteracy is described as a major problem by the most influential groups. It stands out statistically like a solid fact in many industrialized countries. It has justified the creation of major means of literacy education or means of combating illiteracy. But we are still looking for the illiterates (17).

Their main characteristic could well be in the rejection of downgrading and in the rejection of the ends at which downgrading aims: compulsory literacy. In fact, in certain countries legislation imposes sanctions on the failure or refusal to participate in training schemes "offered" to them.

4. THE LITERACY CONTEXTS

Criticism of the social construction of illiteracy does not necessarily lead to the radical negation of the "object" as certain ethnologists

are tempted to do, nor does it lead to literary praise (18). From the point of view of action, it helps to conceive and to test other strategies of literacy or cultural action, less centered on reading, writing and counting exercises, more independent of the school, oriented towards the practical solution to the daily priority problems which rarely undergo the long learning process of writing and better integrated in local community organizations. These actions imply the voluntary participation of those involved, a condition which is only possible when the individuals are no longer filed as "illiterates".

From the research point of view, criticism of illiteracy has shifted the emphasis of the question. The concept is too loaded, too active, ethically speaking too negative to be restored. It neither helps to think nor to change the course of action. The question of literacy must also be explored in different ways other than by ideologies alone. How can one objectivize interactions with the written word in a given context of communication, defined by a group of technical, psychological, sociological, economic, cultural or symbolic variables? What are the subjective and objective relationships of individuals and groups to means of communication to which they have access in a precise situation?

There are two approaches to these questions, as J. Goody has suggested by transforming the Marxist concept of production model into a communication model: a material or technological variable and a sociological variable: the communication links or the individual and collective use of the information (19). In borrowing these useful concepts from Marxism one has to jettison at least two of their premises of methodology: materialism which would make means of communication into the ever determining variable and economism which discharges too readily the symbolic exchanges.

What are the main variables to be examined in analysing a social context of communications?

- The development of the technology of communication: the distinction is often made between basic literacy and computer literacy, as if there were two different levels of cultural integration to the written word. In reality, most objects and situations which involve the written word, and often the spoken word, are mediatized by electronics. The majority of the population is literate, at least passively, to the means of electronic messages. What profound cultural changes has the "computer revolution" brought about in ways of thinking and communicating?
- The economy or the communication goods market: the question arises for

electronics, paper, telecommunication services. Are these goods rare, normal, universally available? How are they distributed? Is their production increasing or decreasing? Are they free? (For instance, free district newspapers or information by telephone). What place is occupied by cultural industries in the local economy?

- Consumption of communication messages, objects, tools and services: that is the demand part in relation to the preceding supply from an economic point of view. What types and what quantities of written goods, mediatized in written form, enter a household? Leave a household? How often? What class of the population buys a microcomputer? Who writes and receives letters?
- Political control of the market. R. Hoggart and K. Levine particularly stressed this aspect: distribution policy and censorship of cultural goods, the "quality" of mass cultural products, the role of the State in the press, the monopolization of information by the private sector or by the State. These questions arise in totalitarian regimes as well as in free market economies. What are the actual possibilities of receiving a given kind of message? What are the actual chances of being able to send one? In many situations the control of information results in restricted literacy, often limited to reception or to reading and blocked in expression, exchange and dialogue.
- The policy of cultural transmission, in particular by schools. The question of accessibility by right to school services and to the services of continuous education hardly arises any longer in the northern countries. But the question of the quality of these services for different population groups is raised vehemently; questions on the selectivity of educational methods, institutions, subjects; questions on ideological programming of school texts and teacher training. Olga Kunst Gnamus raised the question in this way in Yugoslavia: "How can one go from the prescribed model of education which transforms the cultural sphere into a bleak path to the concept of considered, critical and creative literacy in the service of a democratic society where homogeneity and hierarchy give way to heterogeneity, dialogue between the differences and intercultural communication?" (20)
- The values attached to the written word, to literacy: these are values of exchange, for example in the job market, which determine social status; also values of usage in the practical and affective relationships of individuals and groups to the written word. The institutions and also the state of the labour market determine the price of the former. K. Levine

thus talks about the "decline in the objectives of literacy education. On account of the prestige conferred by education, any general improvement in the subject standards will automatically prejudice the less educated groups" (21). The value of usage varies according to personal needs and the desires attached to the written objects.

- The practices and uses of the written word: when, how, for what uses does one apply the written word, the spoken word, both of them, the pencil or the printer in everyday life? How does one resolve a problem of information in concrete terms when elements are missing from the context? For example, in calling upon the services of the community instead of a single agent or by dividing acts of communication according to sex: writing for women, accounts and signatures for men, etc. David Barton particularly stresses the importance of observing "literacy events" in everyday life, the distinction of "areas" of use of the written word, the distinct cultural "practices" of social groups during such an event, and the values attached to the acts or the feelings they invest in them (22).
- The ideologies which define a meaning and a value to literacy: the subject has been dealt with in the previous sections. Part of these are the scientific discourses which define the subject with authority, more often by eclipsing their ideological and corporatist functions.
- Linguistic diversity, cultural diversity: these variables have already been intersected by the political variables. Depending on the context, one is faced with several languages, written languages and spoken languages, standard languages and dialects, several linguistic areas, etc. In fact, it is seldom for a cultural context to be linguistically homogeneous, whereas social or institutional standards generally impose unilingualism. This question of balance of power between languages also applies to native language and programmed language. These may coexist or be mutually exclusive. The latest work of Paolo Freire and his colleagues in the United States approaches these questions of linguistic and cultural hegemony in the standardization of literacy education in the singular (23).
- Finally and obviously, there is the variable of individual competence in physiological and psychological interaction with the written word. This is the subject that is dealt with most in the literature on literacy education. It is also the one which attempts are made to measure most often and for which there already is substantial methodological material.

David Harman compared the current research on competence to the quest for the Holy Grail: singular, divorced from the cultural context, from the

meaning and the value which individuals attribute to it, it will not be found (24). It is only a variable within a context which itself is variable and multiple. In certain cases it may be determinative: for instance in cases of autism or cerebral paralysis where there is no more communication. But even in a situation of integral non-literacy where the written word is definitely foreign to vernacular exchanges, a use will be found for written objects, they will be included in the circuits of communication by giving them a meaning and a value in keeping with the new context. This is what must be found: the meaning, the value and the uses of the written word in a special cultural context.

Literacy competence is also not a unique capacity, limited to the linguistic field and to a particular activity in that field such as reading. Often the oral exchanges of literacy are excluded, sometimes writing or even silence. (There is a word in English to designate the absence of practice of the written word: "aliteracy". In French these people are termed "non-lecteurs" which may be synonymous with "illiterates".) Why the fixation on reading and not, for example, on personal, written, spoken and silent expression?

In recent surveys the reading tests tend to be replaced by the problem solving tests which address various capacities and different capability registers (25). These tests (imposed, even gently) make use of the experience gained in a context familiar to the individual and also make use of practical knowledge and the meaning common to this context. Certain complicated tests may require only an elementary ability to read (for example, when questions are asked orally and it is sufficient to recognise in the main a few iconic or symbolic signs to answer them). Even then! In everyday life deciphering and responding do not impose being alone: often it is better with two or more people.

The famous continuum of literacy one tries to measure on scales of competence is an abstract idea. But it is an active abstraction, because it will impose its standards of procedure, classification and interpretation. In the survey situation or in a test interview there is no negotiation of meaning, value or power. The exchange is forced. The created context is in danger of being conflicting, indeed antagonistic. The real test for the candidates is to get out of it. How are they going to do it? That is the interesting question before such a literacy event.

CONCLUSION

In view of the (much debated) results of so much militancy, missionary effort and activism in the noble cause of the struggle against illiteracy, literacy research and activities merit a return to the object of fascination, illiteracy itself, and to the motives and operation of this peculiar mobilization. The International Year will have established and reinforced this. It will also have brought about meetings like this of researchers from Eastern and Western Europe, which may be an occasion for a new look into the social factors syncretized in the term literacy (or its opposite).

My primary intention was to relativize the notions of literacy and illiteracy, taking them as ideological facts to be placed in a historical context which explains their emergence and their dramatic attraction in the minds of many Western societies. Contrary to the positivist positions supported by the quantitative techniques for measuring the levels of competence of the individual, illiteracy has been examined like a myth whose main characteristic is not being a false idea, but rather a symbolic discourse intended to act effectively in a history in a state of crisis. In a unitary way it sets out to bring about a vast social consensus in identifying multiple problems known to society in the West and in exorcising the evil known as illiteracy.

If one loses sight of the mythical functions of the struggle against illiteracy there is a danger of taking into account only the explained objectives of education and expecting only pedagogical results. These, however, are by no means widely known and internal assessments during literacy programmes show that they are questionable. But the social effects of the discussion on the dangers of illiteracy are much more noticeable: the large-scale mobilization from local levels to international levels, the increase in the field of basic education and employment education in a sector hitherto occupied by charity organizations and volunteer workers, the spreading of education as an alternative to restrict long-term unemployment and exclusion.

Training the potential or the employed workforce has become the main theme of literacy programmes. However, the training occupation only rarely leads to employment. It is a long-term alternative for a growing population. It also has the advantage of appearing as a way out of social assistance programmes for "risk" population groups. To what extent does it achieve this? These questions of assessment of the results of literacy programmes in

relation to the explained pedagogical objectives and also with their more diffuse social functions, are essential for research which until now has invested especially in the development of training activities.

The second intention of the article was to find another area for research as little explored as the former: the material and social conditions of literacy development in a particular historical context and the comparative analysis of different contexts as seen for example in Eastern and Western countries. The area where most has been invested, educational methods, is one which is generally in line with the normative discourse of the struggle against illiteracy. Hence the emphasis on the subject of individual reading (especially) and writing skills, an archetype of school

widen the problems of literacy to include the social conditions of the use of the means of information and communication, to include the differentiated uses according to cultural heritage and the social category of the individuals, to include the comparative historiography of literacy, literacy campaigns and the resistance of certain groups to control and cultural domination.

This other research programme may be particularly fruitful for East-West cooperation from the fact that the different political history of the two regions has created very different development conditions for communication. If the crisis (or combined crises) in the West is the origin of the invention of illiteracy and the priority given to its resorption, what cultural techniques have the recent crises in the Eastern countries given rise to? What utopias are to be found in literacy? To what individual and collective ends? Or will the destructuring of the job market and social organisation result in mobilization for training?

Before finalizing universal techniques for measuring levels of literacy, I believe it is more appropriate to understand such a phenomenon diffuse in its differences which are due less to levels of individual competence than to social contexts which give them a meaning.

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