ED334870 1991-07-00 Measuring the Nation's Literacy: Important Considerations. ERIC Digest.

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ERIC Identifier: ED334870
Publication Date: 1991-07-00
Author: Wiley, Terrence
Source: National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education Washington DC.

Measuring the Nation's Literacy: Important Considerations. ERIC Digest.

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For more than a decade, politicians, pundits, leaders of industry, and educators have lamented the "literacy crisis" in the United States. Various reports and surveys have been cited offering conflicting data on the extent of illiteracy, but generally agreeing that illiteracy rates are alarmingly high, particularly among immigrants and language minorities. In 1982, for example, the English Language Proficiency Survey (ELPS) placed the non-literate U.S. adult population at between 17 and 21 million; 7 million of that group were from homes where a language other than English was spoken (U.S. Dept. of Education, NIE, 1986; National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, 1991).

Measures of literacy are important in many sectors of society. Employers use literacy levels as a barometer of the capacity of individuals to participate in an economy where literacy has been largely assumed; educators rely on literacy data for feedback on how well programs are providing the skills considered requisite for participation in the social, economic, and political arenas; policy makers rely on such data to determine where, and to what extent, educational resources are needed to promote literacy.

Attempts to measure literacy, however, have had drawbacks. We must confront the fact that our ability to measure literacy across a large population is limited by a lack of resources allocated to measuring literacy, by our instruments of assessment, and by our notions of what it means to be literate. Moreover, in the process of assessing literacy we run the risk of imposing "elite" standards (Resnick & Resnick, 1977) on the population as a whole and of stigmatizing those who fail to meet these standards (Wiley, 1988).

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING LITERACY

In reporting literacy data there is a problematic tendency to dichotomize findings by imposing a boundary between "literacy" and "illiteracy." While some authors have suggested that literacy should be conceptualized as a single set of skills measured along a continuum, others argue that it is better portrayed as the ability to perform specific print-related practices in specific social contexts, thereby implying "many literacies" rather than one type of literacy (Heath, 1980; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). Unfortunately, national assessments utilizing the latter definition are not very feasible (see also Crandall & Imel, 1991, for discussion of definition issues).

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF VARIOUS APPROACHES TO MEASURING

LITERACYThere are three major ways of measuring literacy: self-assessments, surrogate measures, and direct measures or tests. Self-assessed literacy, where individuals rate their own reading and writing abilities, has been used by the United States Census since the 1850s. It has long been popular in national surveys in general because of its limited cost. However, since World War I, it has been argued that the

self-reported data of the census overestimate literacy levels (Venezky, Kaestle & Sum, 1987).

In response to this concern, surrogate measures and direct measures have been used. In the forties, the army began using grade-level completion (initially four years and later six years) as a surrogate measure of literacy. The major limitation of this approach is that the number of years of schooling completed provides no guarantee of literacy skill mastery (Hunter & Harman, 1979; Venezky, et al., 1987).

Direct testing of an individual's literacy competency is preferable when resources permit. Surveys which have used direct measures include the Adult Performance Level (APL), developed in the 1970s (Hunter & Harman, 1979), the ELPS (mentioned above), and the 1985 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) literacy survey of young adults, ages 21 to 25 (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986).

Many of the tasks used in direct measures of literacy and reasoning ability are particular to a specific situation or set of situations. The ability to complete a task specific to one situation may not transfer readily to another. For example, school-based literacy tasks do not necessarily carry over to work-related literacy tasks (Harste & Mikulecky, 1984; Mikulecky, 1990). Consequently, it is misleading to generalize about literacy in global terms beyond the specific contexts assessed. Recognizing this, the NAEP young adult survey attempted to test literacy through simulations of literacy tasks divided into three broad types of text and task demands: prose, document, and quantitative. Nevertheless, the ecological (real-world) validity of simulations may be questioned given the artificial nature of the test or of the testing situation (see Edelsky, et al., 1983, and Erickson, 1984, for related discussions regarding school-based literacy tests).

In addition, Hunter and Harman (1979) note that the competencies selected for testing are not negotiated with those tested, but are imposed by committees of largely middle-class educators, raising concerns regarding how well the literacy needs, realities, and values of the individuals tested are understood, especially when they are language minorities. This criticism has been leveled most strongly against one of the better-known surveys of adult functional competency, the APL. Hunter and Harman (1979, p.19) caution: "Who but the person or group involved can really describe what 'effective functioning in one's own cultural group' really means?" Moreover, they note that another essential question is: "Whose needs are served by generalized statistics about the population?" To play a positive role, assessment should be used to determine the kinds of literacy deemed necessary, not only by employers and educational policy makers, but also by the individuals themselves who are targeted for programs.

CONFUSING ILLITERACY WITH NON-ENGLISH LITERACY

Regardless of the approach used to measure literacy, a major limitation of most national assessments has been their lack of attention to literacy in languages other than English. For the past two decades, the United States has been undergoing its second greatest period of foreign immigration; it now has the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world (Simon, 1988). By failing to survey Literacy in Spanish and other non-English languages, "literacy" is confused with "English literacy" (Vargas, 1986). For example, the often-cited ELPS (see above) measured only English literacy.
While it is true that English holds the dominant language of the United States, it does not necessarily follow that English literacy can or should fulfill all of the needs of language minorities (Fishman, 1980). This reduction of literacy to English literacy appears to be related to the dominant language attitudes in the United States, which ignore linguistic diversity and promote the myth that this is a monolingual nation (Bhatia, 1983; Simon, 1988).

The omission of languages other than English from literacy surveys is significant because it inflates our perception of the extent of the so-called "literacy crisis." More seriously, it stigmatizes as illiterate many who are literate in other languages. In educational policy making and program planning it results in a failure to distinguish those who lack sufficient initial literacy in their native language from those who could utilize their native language literacy as a basis upon which to build English literacy.

To date, the 1979 National Chicano Survey (NCS) is the only nationally representative survey that has allowed for biliteracy analysis or for non-English language analysis. Secondary data analyses of the NCS show an overall functional literacy rate of 74%--with 52% English literate, 42% Spanish literate, and 22% biliterate in English and Spanish. If only English literacy had been measured, illiteracy would have been 48%--as opposed to 26% by also measuring Spanish literacy (Macias, 1988; Wiley, 1988).

CONFUSING LIMITED ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH WITH ILLITERACY

Lastly, with respect to language minority populations, a distinction must be clearly drawn between English literacy and English oral language proficiency. Vargas (1986) observes that it is often wrongly assumed that limited oral proficiency in English "causes" English illiteracy. He adds that there is a failure to recognize that some who are orally fluent in English may not be English literate and that many who are English literate may not be orally fluent in the language. Vargas concludes that the problem of becoming literate in a second language must be differentiated from the problem of orally learning a second language and from the problem of becoming literate for the first time in either one's first or one's second language.

CONCLUSION

In relying on literacy data to develop informed educational policies for schools, communities, and the workplace, we must recognize that the three major approaches to measuring literacy provide information which is necessarily constrained by how literacy is conceptualized and by limitations in the allocation of resources for assessing literacy in languages other than English. Direct measures of literacy are preferable to the other approaches, but attention must be given to their ecological validity. In the construction of literacy surveys and in the interpretation of literacy data, we must also carefully consider whether we have cast our nets to catch "literacy" or only "English literacy."

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Title: Measuring the Nation's Literacy: Important Considerations. ERIC Digest.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Descriptors: English (Second Language), Illiteracy, Limited English Speaking, Literacy,

Measurement Techniques, Oral Language, Self Evaluation (Individuals), Testing
Identifiers: ERIC Digests
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