

What Does the National Assessment of Adult Literacy Say About Low-Literacy Adults?

M Cecil Smith

Although the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) did not specifically assess the literacy skills of adults that were identified as participants in the adult basic education (ABE) system, the results of this large-scale assessment are nonetheless important for professionals in the ABE field to understand. The NAAL was conducted in 2003 by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, and it is the most recent data available concerning U.S. adults' literacy skills. A nationally representative sample of over 19 thousand adults, living in households and prisons in the U.S., participated in the NAAL. The first report describing the results was released in December, 2005, and four subsequent reports have also been issued by IES. These reports address health literacy, literacy among the prison population, and the literacy skills of the "least literate" of adults. All of these reports are available on the NAAL website (<http://nces.ed.gov/naal/>).

Literacy was defined as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." Three dimensions of literacy ability were assessed in the NAAL: prose, document, and quantitative literacy. *Prose literacy* is the knowledge and skills required to search, comprehend, and use information from texts such as news articles and instructional materials. *Document literacy* is the knowledge and skills needed to search, comprehend, and use document materials such as job applications, bus schedules, maps, and food labels. *Quantitative literacy* is the knowledge and skills needed to identify and perform computations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials. Examples include balancing a checkbook, completing an order form, or calculating the total interest on a loan from reading a bank advertisement.

Participants' scores were grouped into four levels of literacy proficiency that ranged from those adults judged to be *proficient* in their prose, document, and quantitative (PDQ) literacy skills, those having an *intermediate* level of ability, adults whose skills were judged to be at a *basic* level of proficiency, and those who are *below basic* literacy proficiency. These latter two groups include many adults who are most likely to be the recipients of adult basic education services at some time in their lives.

Specific literacy proficiency results for the ABE population that participated in the NAAL are not available from IES. It is, nonetheless, possible to make some inferences about the ABE population from the NAAL results.

Characteristics of the ABE population in the NAAL. In general, ABE students are low-literate adults ages 16 and older that are no longer being served in a secondary education program, according to the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, P.L. 105-220 (1998). Adults having less than or only some high school education (not including the 16-18 year olds that are still enrolled in high school) make up the NAAL population that is likely to have a significantly large number of individuals that participate in ABE programs. The "less than or some high school education" population represented 50 percent of all adults that were below basic proficiency for prose literacy, 45 percent of all adults that scored at below basic proficiency for document literacy, and 64 percent of all adults that scored at the same level for quantitative literacy. Adults without a high school diploma were as much as five times more likely to be below basic proficiency in literacy than were adults possessing a GED or other high school equivalency.



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Center for the Interdisciplinary
Study of Language and Literacy

PDQ performance of ABE population. Prose, document, and literacy proficiencies were reported using a 500-point scale, for which 250 was the average score. Adults with less than or only some high school education had average scores of 207 (prose), 208 (document), and 211 (quantitative) points. An adult with this level of educational attainment who attained these scores would be considered below basic proficiency for prose and quantitative literacy, and at the low end of the basic proficiency level for document literacy.

ESL adults. English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs are the fastest growing among all state-administered adult education programs, according to the U.S. Office for Vocational and Adult Education. Undoubtedly, many of the adults at the below basic proficiency level are immigrants who do not read or speak English and who may also be illiterate in their native language. Adults that were judged to be nonliterate in English for the NAAL represented two percent of the population. Additional information about non-English literate adults is as yet unreported. However, 25 percent of the population that performed at the lowest proficiency level for the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, consisted of immigrants learning to speak English. Judging from the rapid growth of ESL programs, this percentage is likely to have increased over the past two decades. Census 2000 data analyzed by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education show that there are slightly more than 3 million adults that have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent degree and either do not speak English or do not speak English well.

Adults having learning disabilities. Forty-six percent of the adults that performed at the below basic proficiency level reported having one or more cognitive and/or physical disabilities—including four percent with a learning disability. It is likely that a portion of this population of disabled adults participate in ABE programs, although the exact number is unknown.

Some Implications for Adult Basic Education

There are clearly large numbers of U.S. adults whose literacy skills are insufficient for the demands of contemporary life in our society. As workplaces increasingly demand knowledge workers who can read and understand text information, it is essential that low-literate adults have access to adult basic education programs so that they can improve their literacy skills. It will continue to be important for program providers to find ways to make their programs more accessible and effective for adult learners.

M Cecil Smith, Ph.D., is a former professor of educational psychology at Northern Illinois University. His research on adult literacy has been funded by the American Educational Research Association, the International Reading Association, and the U.S. Department of Education.