Trends

Reading

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Are We a Nation of Illiterates?

Almost every day, I hear or read that we are a nation of illiterates. Some reports suggest that this condition affects as many as one in five adults. We have some problems, but surely the numbers are not that great. But how high are they, and what do the authors of these reports mean when they say "illiterate"?

Everybody who shares my concerns about illiteracy in America should read *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults* (Kirsch and Jungeblut 1986), a study based on a 1985 nationally representative survey of 3,600 young adults, aged 21–25. Participants were interviewed for 30 minutes and then individually administered 105 tasks that simulated real-life situations. The assessment measured their ability in the areas of prose literacy (e.g., books, magazines, newspapers); document literacy (e.g., graphs, forms, schedules); and quantitative literacy (math in combination with printed materials; e.g., checkbooks). The measurement also included some exercises in reading from the last National Assessment of Educational Progress in order to compare the performance of young adults with the in-school population.

Results of the study showed that 95 percent of young adults tested reach or exceed the average reading proficiency level of fourth-grade students. Eighty percent reach or exceed the average reading proficiency of eighth-grade students, and 62 percent reach or exceed the average reading proficiency of eleventh-grade students. The study concluded that "illiteracy" is not a major problem for the young adult population. Thomas G. Sticht, a literacy expert who wrote the forward for the report, states that the United States has the world's highest rate of basic literacy. He reports that other countries that claim nearly total literacy have much lower standards than ours.

To most people the word "illiterate" means "can't read." According to this definition, then, the fact that 95 percent can function at or above fourth-grade level suggests that the overwhelming majority of people are not illiterate. They can read well enough to get information and perform common tasks. The degree of their literacy, however, is another question.

The report's statistics are particularly disturbing for Hispanics and blacks. While more than 96 out of 100 white young adults read at or above the fourth-grade level, only 92 out of 100 Hispanic and 82 out of 100 black young adults have attained that level. This difference persists at the eighth- and eleventh-grade proficiency levels.

According to this large, representative assessment, America is not a land of illiterates. Thirty-eight percent of the young adults tested could not function as well as the average eleventh-grader, but most young adults have achieved basic reading skills, which suggests that our literacy problems do not come from the often claimed "lack of basic decoding skills." The report concludes that sizable numbers of people perform in the middle ranges on each scale and, while not illiterate, may not be literate enough to be fully functional in a technologically advanced society. This suggests a literacy problem that can be solved only if our schools focus on higher-level reading and thinking skills.

Reference

Kirsch, I. S., and A. Jungeblut. *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults*. Princeton, N.J.: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1986. (To obtain this report, write to NAEP CN6710, Princeton, NJ 08541-6710, or call 1-800-223-0267. The price is $12.50 per copy, $6.25 for three or more copies.)

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Textbooks

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The Key to Success: Monitoring and Modifying

There is only one way to ensure that any program will succeed with your teachers and students: determine whether or not it's doing what you want it to do and then change whatever is necessary to make it succeed. To install any new program and not monitor and modify is asking for trouble. Yet this is what most districts do with new textbook programs. They buy it, then forget it!

A monitoring/modifying system need not be complicated, time-consuming, or expensive. One simple two-track system that any size district can implement involves the principal and one teacher "monitor" in each building. In the first track, building principals monitor student end results: student products and tests or whatever gauge your district uses to measure success. In the second track, teacher monitors are responsible for the successful operation of the new program. One person, usually the subject supervisor (or, in small districts, the person responsible for curriculum), oversees the teacher monitors and keeps a district perspective. This separate two-track system holds standards high, while at the same time providing support for anyone responsible for meeting those standards. This article will describe only how the teacher monitoring works.

Monitors are selected because they are good listeners and are respected by the other faculty. Although they may be experts in the subject, this is *not* the criterion for selection. Their first task is to listen and log teacher comments and questions verbatim by grade level, referencing specific pages.

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