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Study: Gaining and losing literacy skills over the life course

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1994 to 2003

Many Canadians experience a significant loss of literacy skills during adulthood, and this loss appears to be concentrated in adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds, according to a new study.

The study, based on findings from the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the 2003 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, examined how Canada's stock of literacy skills evolved during the nine-year period between the two surveys.

It showed that literacy is not a static commodity acquired in youth and maintained throughout life.

The results provided compelling evidence that, on average, some groups of people lose literacy skills after the period of formal schooling, but the amount of skill loss differs considerably from group to group.

The loss of literacy skills in Canada appears to be a gradual process that begins at the age of about 25, peaks at around 40, and tapers off during late middle age (55).

For example, adults aged 40 in 1994 had average scores on the IALS literacy test of about 288. When this test was implemented nine years later, those who were aged 49 had average scores of about 275.

A skill loss of about 13 points over the nine year period is roughly equivalent to the average increase in literacy skills associated with half a year of additional schooling.

Taking into account that the loss of literacy skills appeared to be lesser for young and late middle age adults, the study estimated that on average, most Canadian adults experience a skill loss over their lifetime of about one grade level.

Several factors can reduce the magnitude of losses, according to the study. For example, exposure to education appears to have a positive impact on keeping literacy skills. Individuals with a university degree had average scores that were about 30 points higher than those of

secondary school graduates.

The level of general reading at work also had a positive impact, as did employment.

Individuals who read frequently, and choose a wider range of materials, scored higher than those who did not read as frequently. Individuals who were employed scored about 12 points higher than those who were not in the labour force. This finding suggests that the prevailing level of economic and social demand for skill use has an impact on skill maintenance.

The study also examined differences among the provinces in their average levels of literacy and their skill loss. Provinces and regions varied substantially in their average levels of literacy skills.

A small proportion of these disparities is attributable to differences in the demographic age and sex distributions of the provinces. But even when these were taken into account, there remained considerable variation.

The study results hold several important messages for policy makers, and suggest that the magnitude of literacy skill loss is high when judged in educational terms, for it eliminates literacy acquisition that took months, or even years, to acquire on average.

In addition, given the relationship of literacy skills to individual economic and social outcomes, and to macro-economic performance, it is reasonable to assume that the economy pays a price for literacy skill loss.

Finally, the probability of whether a group will gain or lose literacy skills appears to depend on a variety of factors over which both individuals and governments can exert some degree of control.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [4406](#).

The report "Gaining and losing literacy skills over the lifecourse", as part of the *International Adult Literacy Survey Series* ([89-552-MWE2007016](#), free), is now available from the *Publications* module of our website.

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact Client Services (toll-free 1-800-307-3382; 613-951-7608; fax: 613-951-4441; educationstats@statcan.gc.ca), Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics.

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