Knowing Literacy for Teaching, Testing Literacy for Policy: Literacy Workers and a Survey of Reading Skills
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Abstract: A recent study of reading-related skills of people at lower IALSS levels provoked critique from a literacy work perspective. This paper extends the critique, focusing on the study’s claimed implications for literacy teaching. These are shown to ignore or deny knowledge grounded in literacy practice and practice-oriented research, concerning e.g., how reading allows skills growth (not just the opposite), the essential place of reasons for reading, and the importance of programming benefits that can not be reduced to skills gains. All this is considered in relation to the current suppression of the voices of literacy work in literacy policy discourse.

Three recent policy-oriented reports on adult literacy – Learning Literacy in Canada (Grenier et al., 2008), Reading the Future (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008), and Addressing Canada’s Literacy Challenge (Murray et al., 2009) – hereafter LLC, RTF, and ACLC – have substantial implications for literacy practice, but are strikingly insensitive to, even dismissive of, knowledge grounded in practice.

The reports have different emphases, but all present results from the International Survey of Reading Skills – hereafter ISRS – a survey-testing designed to clarify what limits of vocabulary and decoding skills keep over 40% of adult Canadians below IALSS level 3 (Statistics Canada, 2005), and to identify background characteristics that relate to IALSS and ISRS levels. LLC and RTF emphasize “implications” for programming and teaching; RTF and ACLC incorporate the survey findings into an overarching analysis of the costs and benefits of “solving the problem.”

Provoked by the first two reports, an ad hoc group of practitioner researchers and field-oriented academics wrote and distributed a brief critique (Literacies, 2008a), calling for cautious reading of the reports.1 The critique, for example, addressed the reports’ claimed teaching implications: Tests capable of informing instruction must be aligned with how people construe reading, and how practitioners actually teach (cf. Campbell, 2007); the ISRS tests are not so aligned, and cannot inform instruction. The reports ignore substantial practitioner knowledge about literacy teaching and development.

This critique, one member of the ad hoc group observed, “struck a nerve. Adult literacy learners, and many practitioners, are frustrated that they are routinely ignored by policy-makers” (Literacies, 2008b). In this paper, to support further discussion, I try to read the reports for and from the perspective of literacy workers. I particularly focus on teaching and learning issues, and on the first two reports. That entails two endeavours.

People often – reacting to the statistical wizardry of such reports – either shun them or treat them with undue deference. Thus the IALS numbers have gained a commonsense currency, so that even otherwise skeptical journalists or well-grounded literacy organizations just report the findings as free-standing “facts” – at worst, “40% illiterate!” – without clarifying how they were produced or what they actually say. Hoping to deflect something similar here, I offer a partial rendition, as accessibly as possible, encapsulating, mostly in prose, many of the ISRS findings (focusing only on those tested in English).
ISRS is part of a high-powered and costly policy-oriented literacy testing regime. The reports often seem to suggest that arrangements of teaching and programming can be deduced from policy-oriented tests, without attention to knowledge embedded in practice or research by practitioner and practice-oriented researchers. Reading the reports from a literacy work perspective, some remarkable splits come to light, between the reports’ claims about people’s reading abilities and learning needs, and what literacy workers know and work with, in everyday ways. (“Literacy workers” in this paper are experienced and articulate. Although they are not a generalization but an “ideal type,” several actual literacy workers have read drafts of this, and found it familiar and confirming).

From information-processing to component skills
For 15 years, IALSS and its predecessors have tested not traditionally conceived literacy skills, but skills of “information-processing” – locating and combining bits of information in texts or documents, doing operations with or drawing inferences from that information, and doing all this in a variety of tasks with a variety of texts. But the information-processing model offers a “broad characterization” (LLC 38) that “masks more complex reading profiles ….” It is less “robust” when applied to readers of lesser abilities (ACLC 19).

To better understand people at IALSS level 1 and 2 (the reports discuss “prose literacy” levels), ISRS shifts direction, using “clinical reading tests” described here (with examples of easiest to most difficult items). A vocabulary test gave people a word to be matched with one from a set of four visual images (from farm and sawing, through oasis and confiding). In two decoding tests, people read lists of words, as many as possible in a limited time. There was a real word list (from go and dog, through wilderness and penitent), and a pseudo-word list (from mo and ik, through morlindon and pitocrant). There were other tests, less prominent in the analysis: tests of spelling (from dig and rope, through distance and confusion); of rapid letter-naming; and of oral comprehension and fluency.

The tests’ concern is specifically “word reading and vocabulary skills that are thought to underlie the emergence of the fluent and automatic reading associated with Level 3 performance ….” (LLC 23). It’s striking, from a literacy work perspective, that these are not tests of reading. There is no actual reading, let alone of the particular reading that people do in their lives. There are no newspapers, instruction manuals, lyrics, letters, but rather bits-and-pieces (vocabulary knowledge and bare word-decoding) isolated out of reading. Put differently, from a literacy work perspective, the testing is utterly inauthentic. The study claims to provide news about reading – but without looking at actual reading at all.

ISRS and IALSS scores indeed ascend together. Gradients of ISRS decoding, vocabulary, and even spelling scores parallel the gradient of IALSS scores (e.g., LLC 60ff). In a nutshell, ISRS finds that people who are better at doing IALSS tasks have larger vocabularies (at least within the limits of the word-picture matching test), and are better at decoding (at least isolated words and pseudo-words). With restricted vocabulary or sluggish decoding, it is difficult for people to find and use information in texts. However, it’s also true that “adequate” decoding and vocabulary are a “necessary but not sufficient condition” (LLC 23) to attain IALSS level 3. Even with these, people can lack necessary “reading strategies” (LLC 88).

In a further analysis, ISRS divides people below level 3 into groups – not real but psychometric groups – “latent classes” (people with similar configurations of tested abilities
clustered together). The reports describe four groups – distinguished initially by vocabulary and decoding scores – which the reports generally conflate into “meaning skills” and “print skills.”

This discrimination of classes clarifies how many people have very limited tested abilities at the “mechanics” of literacy – only 10% of all those that IALSS says have inadequate literacy skills. Further analysis of class members’ backgrounds shows how many with the lowest decoding and vocabulary scores are second-language speakers. Percentages of second-language speakers are high in both class A (61%) and class B (90%). The RTF and ACLC reports separate out native English speakers (groups A1 and B1), from second-language speakers (A2 and B2).

Across the three reports there are inconsistencies in the ways these classes are assembled, but in the final report, ACLC, the classes are described thus:

**Average vocabulary and decoding ranks, for ISRS classes (ACLC, 28, 31):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Decoding</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Mother-tongue</th>
<th>IALSS Prose Level</th>
<th>% of IALSS Level 1-2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Low 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Non-English</td>
<td>Mid 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Low 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Non-English</td>
<td>Low 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>Mid 2</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>High 2</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Plausible … as far as it goes**

A literacy worker might say, that all this is pretty plausible – as far as it goes. To work with information on the page, people have to know the words, or most of them. They have to decode or otherwise recognize them. Troubles with either of those limit reading ability. And while – or after – working on learning words and decoding them more easily, people also work on using texts in different ways, and using different kinds of texts. Calling that “reading strategies” is ok. But it didn’t take ISRS to show us this. It’s not news. It’s our everyday work with reading – or at least part of it. What the reports say about the bits-and-pieces is fair enough. But the neglect of the rest of reading is astounding.

This might seem harmless, if expensive. However, although it is a strain to transpose tests of something-other-than-reading into a program of instruction, both LLC and RTF are thick with “instructional implications.” So as the portrayals of ISRS circulate, it’s important that there be open dialogue about how they relate to knowledge that arises in practice. In some comments here then I juxtapose what the reports say about reading and teaching reading with what a literacy worker might say, and even note some ways that actualities of literacy work leak into the reports to contradict their primary themes.

One way to zero in on how the reports are only plausible as far as they go, is to note that they adopt what seems a notion of reading instruction as playing bingo. You just mark off various boxes on the learner’s card – decoding, vocabulary, maybe fluency, maybe some “reading strategies” – and then you call out “bingo!” – or “reader!”” When they have the bits-
and-pieces, the work is done. This bingo mentality has two related sources in ISRS’ conceptual underpinnings.

First, it is built into the “components” theory of reading that feeds into ISRS. This is a US-originated theory that generally adheres to the phonics side of the great reading experts’ wars between the proponents of phonics and those of whole-language. It thus accords no attention to why or what people might read, until after they have “the basics.” So the alternative common sense slogan of a “balanced approach” – that grants recognition both to decoding and to how investments of effort in reading are driven by the promise people find in texts – is missing in ISRS’ stated instructional implications.

The second source of the bingo notion is that ISRS seeks not to display how reading is actually done and taught in practice, but to design measurements of skills that “underlie” or “explain performance” on other (IALSS test) measurements. What counts for this purpose, is not however people below level 3 actually read, but only whether they have skills that explain level 3 performance. So, in this vein, for example, ACLC asserts – it’s not observed, it merely follows from the exclusive interest in predictors of level 3 performance – that people are “learning to read up” to level 3, after which they “read to learn.”

A literacy worker, seeing that people get the point, follow the story, are surprised to learn, see that they knew already, from the outset, would find this dichotomy bizarre. But the ISRS reports don’t see any light between policy-oriented testing and people’s actual learning needs or realities of teaching. Whether this is hubristic or just disciplined, there’s not a hint of other kinds of knowledge at play. So, a literacy worker is left to say: Well, yes, but what about the rest? Some aspects of “the rest” follow.

People need opportunities to read, and reading as opportunity.

That people have reasons for reading, or not reading, find it possible or not and relevant or not, is often the first thing that good teaching pays heed to. In its breadth, literacy work concerns itself with whatever denies people the time and space in their lives to read – quiet times and spaces, child-care, and so on. And much of literacy work aims at making reading attractive to learners – by picking the right texts (ones that are practical, provocative, soothing, or otherwise “interesting”), asking the right questions, offering the right encouragement or challenge. Literacy workers don’t deal just with people’s skills, but simultaneously with the sense that it makes for them to risk and invest resources in learning.

This is perhaps the biggest silence in ISRS. People’s reasons for reading are not a “component of reading.” The reports never suggest that teachers might address the point or payoffs (or hazards) of reading. They never suggest respecting people’s assessments of whether they read well enough to deal with the demands in their lives. Indeed ACLC (3) boldly declares that “many adults have no way to judge the adequacy of their skill.” But literacy workers must align with learners, regarding “both what is going on in reading and why one would bother” (Olson and Torrance 2001), both “how you do it” and “what you’re getting into” (Darville, 2001).

Phonics isn’t necessarily first.

The most important square on the bingo card is decoding, and a one-sided phonics emphasis often takes the form of instructional assertions not based on the data but presented as if they were. Thus, e.g., LLC advises, for some of the worst at reading word lists, “a systematic approach to basic phonics” (LLC 45); better decoders still below level 3 are said to “read words
so slowly and inaccurately that they cannot tackle the challenging texts and documents …“ (LLC 58), and the implied cure is obvious. But more might be done, and even the “mechanics” are more complex than that.

Literacy workers of course deal with decoding or word-recognition. They focus sometimes on the bits and pieces, and sometimes on what’s interesting in whole texts, shifting focus from class to class, student to student, even minute to minute, as they find what works in particular situations. So a literacy worker will see at times that “… printed strings of letters on the page must be recognized and pronounced as words and meanings must be attached to them before a reader can comprehend a sentence, paragraph or longer text” (LLC 39). But other times, people figure out phonics patterns beginning with whole words they know, not the other way around. Or people come to recognize words and meanings after and because they are caught up in a longer text. Asserting that learning always goes one-way from bits and pieces to larger chunks of text, and never the other way around or both at once, is merely ideological.

There’s more to the page than words.

When people learn to read or write continuous text, even at the surface level they do more than decode and use individual words. They learn to shape or recognize the shapes of chunks of words and the relationships between them – to find their way around in sentences. Type A’s are learning where sentences start and stop. Type C’s are learning to relate sentence subjects – even across embedded phrases and clauses – to sentence predicates. Although “sentence processing” is mentioned (e.g., RTF 24), it isn’t measured and so isn’t an “instructional implication.” And, oddly, in the attention to second-language speakers’ limited skills, there’s no recognition that they confront distinctive difficulties with syntax. A literacy worker works with these matters every day.

People learn to read - by reading.

The emphasis on isolated-word decoding obscures other processes of teaching and learning, and the importance – even for novice readers – of simply reading. LLC recognizes that reading is good for reading – for good readers. It says that “more-skilled readers” tested at level 2 and above acquire spelling patterns and new vocabulary from reading (LLC 51), and even, confronting new words, strengthen decoding skills (LLC 84). Further, there is considerable evidence that what separates many who score at level 3 from those who don’t is “regular reading” (e.g., LLC 90).

A literacy worker aims to provide people as much experience as possible reading in a variety of texts – regardless of their level of decoding ability. But because of its commitments to a “components” theory that makes phonics a stage preceding other stages, LLC cannot suggest that grappling with whole words and texts can give people opportunities to get the hang of the alphabetic system.

Confidence counts.

Here’s a final crucial issue. Literacy workers know, but ISRS and RTF don’t, that skill only counts when people use it and have the confidence to use it. Literacy workers and researchers have noted for decades that “confidence” or “participation” gains are an important form of success in literacy programs. Recently, Canadian practitioner-researchers have worked to educate policy-makers and psychometricians about the importance of “non-academic” outcomes – including gains in confident willingness to connect with others around information
and ideas in texts (Battell, 2001; Westell, 2005; Lefebvre, 2006). A literacy worker knows the importance of doing your best with a job application rather than avoiding it because you think you’re not very good; or asking questions about health issues when the reading is impossible, rather than passively feeling excluded. No one claims that bravado always trumps technique. But such everyday changes may be more important in actual classrooms and lives than slogging accurately through texts. Life-changing gains don’t entirely depend upon and can’t be reduced to skills gains.

Similarly, both practitioner and academic research have highlighted the importance of connecting reading and writing within a program, with the reading and writing that people do beyond it. Literacy workers know that when learners read outside of class, their skills increase. And when teaching work takes up “authentic” texts and tasks, learners extend their literacy use in general (cf. Purcell-Gates et al., 2004).

Although ISRS is inattentive to confidence and use that go beyond “print and meaning components,” because of its bits-and-pieces focus and its exclusive emphasis on getting to level 3, nevertheless an insight leaks through a crack in LLC (51-2), which notes that “modest gains” in spelling “can be quite meaningful” to people embarrassed in everyday situations. Indeed. Modest gains break a kind of barrier, and can be quite meaningful in many ways.

Coda

Above is a rough sketch, outside the bingo squares, of reading and teaching reading. It may seem to some literacy workers not nearly enough. But however an account from practice goes, it’s important as a basis from which to assess policy-oriented tests. The menace of ISRS and its “instructional implications” is not that they miss this or that aspect of actual reading or teaching. It is that their partial account may be turned into assessment tools for programs, or schemes for training teachers in how (and how not) to teach, or curricula from which life beyond component skills has been squeezed. Policy-testing turned into teaching regimes may strangle programming and teaching inventiveness, and therefore the actual effectiveness of literacy teaching. So literacy work needs to continue to recognize and speak from its own knowledge.

The ACLC report goes on to stake out positions in the adult literacy policy discourse. Indeed its main thrust is to review arguments for the economic importance of literacy, and offer approximations of the costs of bringing all Canadians to IALSS level 3, and the financial and fiscal benefits that might follow. Discussing those is beyond the scope and allowable length of this paper. But the same concerns apply. Different knowledges of literacy serve different purposes. Knowledge that serves literacy workers in their work is not the knowledge that serves policy (for related thoughts on “essential skills,” see Jackson 2005).

These reports provoked the ad hoc critique that “struck a nerve” among learners and practitioners not only because of their apparently determined monologue, but also because they appear at a time when literacy work is under pressure in many ways, from program cuts, the gutting of government support for practice-supporting provincial coalitions, and the apparent demise of Literacies, the journal of practice and research. Policy will not disappear. But getting to actual literacy that is meaningful to literacy workers and learners, and meaningful to employers, unions, health care workers, etc., and even meaningful to policy, depends on the existence and deployment of knowledge grounded in practice.

References


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