

The Construction of a Crisis: Literacy in Canada

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The *Southam Literacy Survey* ($N=2,389$) of 1987 dramatically concluded that 24% of Canadian adults are functionally illiterate. Both in press coverage and in the *Survey* itself, the literacy "crisis" drew on serious misapprehensions. To understand this misconstrual, we must know how the press decided what would count as unacceptably high illiteracy; how its coverage of the *Survey* reinforced traditional definitions of marginalization and social burden in Canadian society; how *Survey* findings, which depict illiteracy on the criteria of education, profession, and reading habits, could be so misinterpreted; and how the form of literacy promoted by the *Survey*, along with the subsequent unwarranted attack on schools, bodes ill for education.

À la suite de son sondage sur l'analphabétisme mené en 1987, Southam News a conclu sur un ton dramatique que 24% des Canadiens d'âge adulte sont des analphabètes fonctionnels. Dans la presse comme dans le sondage lui-même, la "crise" de l'analphabétisme a entraîné de graves méprises. Il nous faut savoir quels critères la presse a retenus pour décider ce qui constituerait un niveau d'analphabétisme inacceptable, comment le champ couvert par le sondage renforçait les définitions traditionnelles de la marginalisation et du fardeau social au sein de la société canadienne, comment les conclusions du sondage, qui décrivent l'analphabétisme en termes de scolarité, de profession et d'habitudes de lecture, peuvent donner lieu à des interprétations erronées et comment le type d'alphabetisation promu par le sondage tout comme l'attaque injustifiée qu'a lancée subséquemment Southam News contre les écoles sont de mauvais augure pour l'éducation.

On 1987 September 12, a few days after the nation's young headed back to school, the spectre of a national literacy crisis broke across the front pages of 26 Canadian newspapers. The headlines from coast to coast declared that a new survey found five million Canadians functionally illiterate ("Survey Rates," 1987, p. A1). One quarter of the country's adults were unable to read or write well enough to get by in daily life. The series, "Special Report: Literacy in Canada," ran the next seven days in Southam and other newspapers. It traced the findings and implications of the *Southam Literacy Survey* commissioned by Southam News and conducted by the Creative Research Group of Toronto (Creative Research Group [CRG], 1987).¹ The survey of 2,389 Canadian adults from across the country had tested partici-

pants' abilities to read and had considered their literacy habits and interests. The "Special Report" was a scathing indictment of literacy in Canada.

The results became a media event that warrants our close attention. A crisis in education is like a river in flood, easily capable of shifting course. This recent version of the literacy crisis shows how literacy becomes a social goal and a perennial problem. Although the press has an interest in the future of literacy, especially in light of inroads made by television news (Thimmesch, 1984), there is more to this crisis than circulation figures. To create a "literacy crisis" means more than fashioning "news" out of a slow-breaking story; the sense of crisis reawakens an old player in the politics of education and, ultimately, the pedagogy of the school. Each renewal of the crisis puts in question the best efforts of the schools and reinforces a back-to-the-basics agenda for teaching the young. Educators need to be forearmed against these constant cries of crisis.

The *Southam Literacy Survey* contained its own reading lessons on the presentation of special interests. It raised the question who counts as literate and what people do with literacy. Literacy was cast in the *Survey* as proficiency in test-items on information thought necessary for successful functioning in post-industrial society. There is an unwillingness here and among other organizations interested in the state of the nation's literacy to trust the self-reported behaviours of citizens; that is, to trust people's own sense of their abilities to read and to write, or to turn to studies of how people do indeed employ literacy in their lives (for example, see Heath, 1983). Although it barely mentioned them, the *Survey* included elements of both literacy self-evaluation and a profile of reading and related behaviours, and its statistics give an encouraging picture of Canadian literacy.

In reviewing the *Survey*, I begin with its measure of literacy, as the Creative Research Group went to considerable effort to arrive at criteria to sort the literate from the illiterate. I end by taking issue with Southam News for both the study and the reporting of it; I by no means argue for complacency about teaching reading and writing or about assisting under-funded and over-subscribed adult literacy programs. But there is danger in setting educational directions because of an insubstantial crisis.

ASCERTAINING THE LITERATE CANADIAN

In this case, the literacy crisis began with the Creative Research Group's foreword to the *Southam Literacy Survey*. Literacy was there a problem in social engineering. Precise tolerance levels would have to be found for efficient operation of the society, or as they put it, "policy makers have to determine on a very practical level the degree of literacy required by its members to function" (CRG, 1987, p. 5). The Creative Research Group did

ask if literacy might encompass personal goals—before dismissing as economically unfeasible “educational programs . . . which would make possible the goal of self-actualization” (p. 5). Higher levels of literacy are a necessary element of re-tooling; the illiterate citizen is cast as grit in the machinery of progress, while policy-makers (and newspaper readers) are encouraged to see literacy as a matter of economic competitiveness and civic function. The Creative Research Group believed a “post-industrial information” mode demanded a new level of minimal literacy. Yet the design of the survey and the final calculations of post-industrial illiteracy made a mockery of this starting point.

The assessment of a nation’s literacy remains an elusive matter. Historians of pre-nineteenth century Europe and America base their measures on inferences drawn from signatures in marriage records and indications of books left in wills (Graff, 1986). In this century, the measures have become more direct and range from self-report to criterion-referenced tests (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Greater precision in the measurement of literacy has led to such subcategories as “functional literacy,” first used by the American Army in World War II to describe minimal standards in following written instructions. Although functional measures are common among civilian populations, reliability has proved elusive (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977–1978; Levine, 1982).²

The Creative Research Group made careful use of the concept of functional literacy in setting appropriate criteria for their study. They first “undertook to establish a criterion measure of functional literacy for Canadian society that was not based on grade level achievement or reading grade level” (p. 5). They dismissed the Statistics Canada measure (“having less than Grade 9 education”) as a “fluctuating standard” not directly related to that which is needed “to function in our complex information society” (p. 4).³ Yet they did not create a test out of their own reading of that society. Drawing on a 1985 assessment of literacy performance in America by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of Princeton, New Jersey, the Creative Research Group prepared two versions of a 38-item test. They pointed out that the items had the advantage of being widely tested and offering an interesting comparative evaluation of Canadian literacy.

After writing the two tests, the Creative Research Group used a jury to determine what might fairly and accurately constitute a Canadian standard. Southam’s jury consisted of 25 “well-known authors, and publishers, but also educational experts, business-men, a union leader, a native Indian, a farmer, a physically handicapped individual, an adult literacy instructor and two of her classes (who gave an aggregate opinion)” (CRG, 1987, Appendices). The group’s composition suggests a mixture of tokenism and professional literacy interests, and yet the inclusion of a composite vote from the literacy

students is a commendable feature. The jury method has been used in other studies of language issues, although it often illustrates the thin veneer of linguistic consensus that sustains the concept of a standard in the language. When Leonard (1932), for example, used a jury of 229 professionals and business people to judge which of 230 common expressions they would accept as literate, he found complete agreement on only four items. Similarly, Diederich (1974) consulted a group of 60 “distinguished readers” to assess students’ essays and found that one third of the papers received the entire range of nine possible marks. It should remind us that we do not, nor seem to need to, share a precise standard for a concept such as “literacy.”

The Southam jury selected test questions from the 38 NAEP items they thought demarcated a “functionally literate” person “dealing with tasks of everyday life.” The items move in complexity from the reading of a traffic sign to stating the theme of an Emily Dickinson poem. As with previous jury panels, the selection of the Southam jury did not smack of consensus: three jury members selected 36 or more out of the 38 items; two decided on less than ten items. The average for the jury was 24.5 test-items that were thought essential to establishing functional literacy.

A second more serious problem about this average figure was its failure to embody consensus. After actually conducting the survey and the initial calculations, the Creative Research Group found the jury’s standards produced unacceptable results:

The average, of 24.5 items correct out of 38, was so high as to categorize 36.5% of adult Canadians as functionally illiterate. This may be a reasonable opinion, but we elected to accept a more liberal standard for functional literacy, and *one that could be easily accepted*. (CRG, 1987, Appendices, emphasis added)

In response to this untenable situation, the Creative Research Group decided to go back to the research design and to alter it. They employed what might be termed the 80% rule. The first step was to select individual test-items that at least 80% of the jury thought crucial to functional literacy; this reduced the number of items required from 24.5 to 20. The second step was to require a minimum of 80% correct on these 20 items, which reduced the requirement for literacy to 16 items.⁴ In the jury’s original deliberations on a standard, only 4 of the 25 members set their standard for functional literacy this low.

The juggling of standards suggests that many of us hold unrealistically high expectations for the level of literacy needed to get through the day. It leads to questions about the degree to which our educational view of literacy should rest on this inflated requirement. In the final research design, there was undoubtedly a certain logic in working from a score of 80% on items that have 80% of jury’s support as key literacy items. Yet it could have gone any of

number of equally logical ways, depending on what sort of figure one is after. In this case the figure was five million Canadians or 24.1% of the population then declared, in banner headlines, to constitute Canada's literacy crisis. The somewhat convoluted *post facto* arrival at a figure adds a certain irony to the series opener's subtitle: "A shocking literacy problem of proportions larger than anyone ever imagined exists in Canada, an extensive survey by Southam News reveals" ("Survey Rates," 1987, p. A1).

THE REPORTED STATE OF LITERACY

The Creative Research Group showed sophistication in treating the geographical distribution and urban/rural balance of the 2,389 Canadian adults over the age of 18 in the survey sample. The test was available in French and English and was conducted on an individual basis with a trained interviewer in the subject's home for approximately 80 minutes (with no time limit on the test-items). In return, the subjects received two \$1 lottery tickets. The key test-items asked subjects to read documents such as a driver's license and a medicine label, to fill in forms such as cheques and job applications, and to work with texts that ranged from newspaper articles to a section of the Canadian Bill of Rights. The results were analyzed by age, sex, province, language, country of origin, and city size. The interviewer also obtained information on employment, income, education, leisure time, and voting habits.

The eight-part series based on the *Southam Literacy Survey* was largely written by Southam News national correspondent Peter Calamai. To prepare for this series, Peter Calamai sat in on literacy classes in Ottawa, joined railway workers and their labourer-teacher on the CPR line in Alberta, spoke to literacy students in Newfoundland, and interviewed innumerable experts. His reporting brings the percentages and other numbers to life, as he moves between the poignant and the sensational aspects of the story. At one point, for example, he cites "illiterates" in "their own words": "I bought a couple of poetry books even when I couldn't read. I like the deepness in poetry. I'd like to understand the depth that the poet has given . . . to get the glory out of his meanings" (Calamai, 1987, September 13). On the same page, Calamai concludes a piece on campus illiteracy: "Statistics aside, there's at least one flesh-and-blood Canadian university graduate currently getting instruction in a literacy program. Now middle-aged, this man born into a wealthy family, went to private schools and graduated from one of the country's best-known universities."

On the front page of *The Calgary Herald*, the first "Special Report" introduced the three key components reiterated over the succeeding eight days: the size of the illiteracy problem, rounded off at 5 million Canadians or

24% of the adult population; the increase over previous figures—"half of these functional illiterates have been left out of past official estimates"—and finally the cost (\$295,000) and scope (2,398 interviews) of the survey ("Survey Rates," 1987, p. A1). But while bandying about these sizeable figures, the article soon slips beyond the survey to point out that "Southam's researchers estimate they didn't get to at least 500,000 more illiterate adults among unsurveyed groups of prisoners, transients, the mentally retarded, natives on reserves, people living north of the 60th parallel and all immigrants unable to speak either official language." After declaring that taken together "these illiterates are an army in numbers only," it states that "darkness and hopelessness are usually their banners." The article then reports that "the picture is not totally bleak. Many illiterates say they are satisfied with their lives."

My concern here is with more than the style of journalism. Calamai's mix of numbers and anecdotes points to a wider range of public apprehensions and anxieties. This reporter is using a well-planned and commissioned story to help the newspaper's readers and its own future by constructing a literacy crisis. The lesson in literacy may well be how these articles raise our sympathies for those suffering this "darkness . . . not totally bleak," assigning the problem to others clearly not among the well-informed readers of the paper.

In outlining the scope of the problem, the article points a finger at "chronic government underfunding" of adult education literacy programs, but more certainly lays the blame for the crisis on two sources: "The survey and other Southam research strongly suggest 100,000 illiterates a year are being added to the Canadian population by a flawed education system and humanitarian immigration policies" (p. A2). There turns out to be some evidence against both charges in the survey. However, the tenor of the newspaper's "Special Report" is that the literacy crisis is part of the problems and threats that regularly trouble the Canadian psyche. In a pattern I trace below, the articles associate illiteracy with Newfoundlanders, immigrants, and workers. Although the stories on these groups form a small part of the subsequent 23 articles in *The Calgary Herald*, their headlines had a special drama, as in sorry Newfoundland—"Newfoundland Doing Little To Fight Highest Illiteracy Rate" (September 12)—and the burden of immigration—"One Million Immigrants Add to Illiteracy Woes" (September 14).

To begin with Newfoundland, whose discussion appeared on the first day of the "Special Report," Calamai opens with a quote from the head of the government department responsible for adult literacy—"I haven't actually met an illiterate. Not that I knew of, anyhow"—after which we are reminded of how "puzzling" this is with nearly half the population (44%) of the province designated illiterate by the *Southam Literacy Survey*. The article then

mentions a certain Wally who has a grade eleven certificate while reading “at about the grade 5 level.” Running through the piece is a subtle undermining of Newfoundlanders that moves from department head to determined literacy student—“‘I can read; I am not stund,’ he says, using the Newfoundland contraction for stunned, meaning stupid” (September 12, p. A5). Can you hear the difference? Then you can probably also hear in this patronizing tone how the crisis could confirm rather than unsettle old ways of thinking about those who live at the very edge of the Dominion.

In the article on illiteracy among Canadian immigrants, Calamai frankly points out that “the [Southam] survey adds new fuel to a decades-old controversy over the effects of multiculturalism” (September 14, p. A7). He goes on to outline the sizeable contribution “large-scale immigration” has made to the literacy crisis. The article fails to mention, although it comes up elsewhere in the series, that projected illiteracy among immigrants came from their inability to take the survey in one of the official languages; they had been, in fact, excluded from the sample, if not from the coverage of its results. Illiteracy becomes part of the unfortunate burden of immigration. The article does not make a case for more financial assistance to literacy programs, as it does at other times in the series, but cites the conclusions of the Mulroney government’s task force which “cast renewed doubts on the effectiveness of immigrant language courses.” The task force suggested that “\$7,000 per immigrant” was “too high a price.” The article does point out that “far more encouraging is evidence that first-generation Canadians, born here of immigrant parents, are academic over-achievers.” Yet taken as a whole, the article contributes to further closing Canadian borders to imported and expensive “illiteracy woes.”

Turning to the third contributing group in this literacy crisis, Calamai presents “Noose Tightens Around Illiterate Worker’s Neck” (September 16, p. A7), which describes recalcitrant illiterates within unspecified sectors of the labour force. The piece speaks of “a tightening vice” that two million workers face as “government and industry studies predict” literacy demands will increase with computerization of the workplace. Workers designated as illiterate (“too limited to handle simple day-to-day reading, writing and use of numbers”) are then blamed for showing little interest in raising their literacy level: “Fewer than 10 per cent say they’re even likely to take remedial instruction.” They look short-sighted because they do not see reading and writing as important to their work: “Twice as many illiterates as literates told the survey interviewers that reading and writing aren’t now important in their job.” Finally, just as unnecessary tax burdens figured in the article on immigrants, they emerge in Laubach Literacy’s programs for workers. Although this organization was awarded a federal grant of 1.2 million dollars, its three projects “are six months behind schedule and have

struggled to reach an initial target of 20 students” for reasons not made apparent (September 16, p. A7). Part of the blame for the reluctance of workers to come forward is also attributed to the unions: “Unions also have concerns about workplace literacy fearing companies may use illiteracy as an excuse for firing an employee who asks for help.” Overlooked in this unsubstantiated comment is the long history of educational programs organized labour has supported and developed, beginning with the mechanics’ institutes and libraries in the nineteenth century (Altick, 1957, pp. 188–212).

Complementing the articles on Newfoundlanders, immigrants, and workers as particularly troubling sources of the crisis, was a piece that set Canada off from the American standard: “First Literacy Test Shows U.S. Ahead of Young Canadians” (September 15, p. A8). Using the NAEP study on which the *Survey* is based, 21 to 25 year-old Americans scored 78% correct compared to 74% for Canadians. While these figures by no means establish who is ahead of whom, the article advances its case by setting the scores in the context of America’s racial handicap: “. . . one in five U.S. youth were either black or Hispanic. One in 10 of the Canadians were [sic] immigrants but all but a handful went to high school here” (p. A8). To point out the number of blacks and Hispanics by comparison to Canadian immigration implies it is a comparable problem suffered on a different scale. Yet the article does not report the American study’s conclusions contradicting Southam’s reading of the Canadian results. George Arnig, the president of Educational Testing Services, which ran the original NAEP study, was very encouraged by what he found: “The results are much better than expected. The country has reached a 95% level of literacy. No other country has achieved that” (Reston, 1986, p. E25). On the other hand, the Creative Research Group, faced with similar scores among Canadians, concluded that the level of literacy in this country was nearly 20 points lower (76%) than Arnig’s estimate for America.

Thus far, I have emphasized two of the more disquieting aspects of the *Southam Literacy Survey*: (1) the design and interpretation of the *Survey* strongly suggests that the cries of a literacy crisis are not warranted, and (2) the press coverage of the *Survey* has made sense of this dubious crisis by reaffirming the marginalization of certain segments of our society and our failure to live up to American standards. To be fair, Calamai covered more ground than this over the eight days, offering other articles on what one might term national apprehensions: “Bilingualism No Guarantee of Literacy” (September 14, p. A7) and “Prison Literacy Plan Doomed” (September 17, p. A10). Yet there is also optimistic coverage of adult literacy programs from across the country: “Literacy Class is a Journey of Small Triumphs” (September 13, p. B3) and “Literacy Groups Devise Methods that Work”

(September 19, p. A8). There was coverage of the fight to clarify language in government documents, a successful literacy comedy-show, "When on the Move," and tips for parents and other concerned parties in promoting literacy development among the young. Yet crucial facts and figures in the *Survey* findings on the lives of "illiterates" were overlooked, underplaying the contradictory nature of the evidence and ignoring the complex web of social practices that constitute literacy.

THE OTHER SIDE OF DESIGNATED ILLITERACY

The claims of the *Southam Literacy Survey* rest on key test-items' accurate embodiment of this society's functional literacy demands. Conclusions from the scores on these items contradict other indications of literacy in the survey. Contrary indicators in the *Survey* include education, profession, reading habits, and attitudes. Although meaning to challenge the quantitative conclusions drawn from the *Survey*, I also seek a more complete picture of what literacy in a print culture means in the lives of Canadians. I ask the reader's forbearance for the array of illiterate-versus-literate percentages necessarily called upon from the *Survey* to illustrate my case.

The first point is the designated illiterate's level of education. By comparing results on key test-items with subjects' educational attainment, the *Survey* created categories of "false illiterates" and "false literates." The "false illiterate" is an "overachiever" who tested literate while possessing less than a grade-nine education, or 12% of literates (CRG, 1987, p. 187). The "false literate" has some high school or better and yet tested as illiterate, or a remarkable 54% of illiterates. That is, more than half of the illiterates, as ascertained by the *Survey*, are regarded by Statistics Canada as literate on the basis of their schooling. As already discussed in this paper, level of educational attainment is not a reliable indicator of literacy and is thus a weak challenge to their poor test results. However, this discrepancy is only the first of a number of challenges to a simplistic designation of who is literate.

A second source of complication in this study is the occupational attainment of the designated illiterates. The *Survey* found that 30% of the professionals and 24% of the business executives/owners/managers failed to test literate (p. 159). Recalling that this group was prominent on the original Southam jury selected to set the standard for literacy, the findings of the study contradict a quarter of their members' claims to be functioning successfully in a literate society. In arriving at suitable figures for Canada's literacy crisis, the Creative Research Group has set a single test score against the accomplishments of an education and a career.

But perhaps the most convincing challenge to the conclusions of the

Survey as to who is literate is the contradiction between test score and reading habits. Certainly, ability to read the newspaper is pertinent here, and 52% of designated illiterates declare themselves to be daily readers of a paper, a figure not much below the 62% literates reported (p. 135). This comparison between illiterates and literates stands up equally well with the reading of the editorial pages (47% illiterates vs. 57% literates), national/international news (65% illiterates vs. 75% literates) and the sports page (54% illiterates vs. 50% literates; p. 138). In the actual time spent reading the paper, the association between illiterate and literate readers is even closer. The designated illiterate's average of 49 minutes is only two minutes short of the time claimed by literates (p. 140). Although it went without headline notice or reporting, the fact that 93% of the sample claimed to spend time with the newspaper would appear encouraging news for both the press and educators.⁵

However, rather than treat these reading habits as legitimate expressions of literate activity, the Creative Research Group blithely concludes that "21% of those who read a newspaper everyday are illiterate" (p. 133). While it is true that the literates had nearly double the score of the illiterates (70% vs. 38%) on the nine newspaper items in the test, these results have to be considered within the context of the questions. Only one item in the newspaper series is published in the *Survey*. Based on an article entitled "Swimmer Completes Strait Marathon," the test-items emphasize secondary details, such as asking "what the swimmer ate to keep up her strength during the swim" (pp. 35–36), which do not necessarily follow the common reading pattern for the genre; they favour instead what might best be termed "test patterns" effective in discriminating among readers. As it stands, conclusions from results on these test-items show that a quarter of newspaper readers spend nearly an hour a day before those inky pages in something approaching uncomprehending oblivion.

Although time spent with magazines and books reveals a greater difference between designated literate and illiterate than time with the newspaper, the illiterate still claims to be participating in this aspect of literate culture. Illiterates indicated that they weekly spent an average of 67 minutes with a magazine, compared to 96 minutes for literate readers (p. 140). With books, the illiterate averages 2.27 hours of reading compared to the literate's 4.31 hours a week; 53% of the illiterates said that they had "read/looked through a book in the last 6 months," compared to 86% for literates (p. 141). The only measure of writing that survived was letter writing, and here 48% of the illiterates claimed to have written "letters of more than one page" an average of 3.4 times a month, which compares to 66% of the literates writing 6.0 times a month (p. 145).

I find that this pattern of differences is less than one would expect

between literate and illiterate, reader and the non-reader. Illiterates did spend 24% more time watching television, at 19.2 hours per week, than literates (p. 142), and yet 25% of the illiterates still claimed to enjoy reading more than television, compared to 39% among literates (p. 146). We might dismiss these pro-literacy indicators as irrelevant to assessing ability to function in a test situation, yet the student of literacy will wish to understand this popular regard for the value of print, important as it is in the commonwealth of literacy.

Literacy is often thought to increase people's participation in democratic politics (Hirsch, 1987; Lipset, 1959). In the present case, the designated illiterate was nearly the equal of the literate in level of political participation. The designated illiterate cares about a free press, although there remain questions about her/his degree of comprehension. The percentage of illiterates who claim nonetheless to vote "every time" in federal (65%), provincial (65%), and local elections (59%) is within a point or two of those found to be literate (p. 152). The percentage of illiterates (44%) who claim to keep up with government and public affairs "most of the time" is only a little less than the still not-very-respectable 52% for literates (p. 153). Yet the differences in levels of politics do not imply that illiterates are undermining the democratic state.

Many of the designated illiterates in this survey carry on as readers, and that finding is complemented by their perception of their need for assistance with reading and writing. Most of the illiterates surveyed reject the basis of their conscription into what was referred to in the "Special Report" as the army with "darkness and hopelessness . . . their banners" ("Survey Rates," 1987, p. A1). The majority of designated illiterates (75%) did not think lack of reading and writing skills were holding them back in their work, although the comparable figure for literates was 92% (pp. 163-164). This reluctance to put stock in the economic advantages of improved literacy skills finds support in Levine's (1982) analysis of the benefits of functional literacy. Of the nearly five million Canadians designated as illiterate, only a fraction are either aware of an inadequacy or show any adverse symptoms of it, beyond their failure to score 80% on a limited set of test-items. This is not to make light of the fact that a third of the population failed test-items involving completing job applications or taking phone messages, to consider two of the most poorly completed items. This contradictory evidence should provoke reflection on how we function in literate society. We may function with a considerable error margin, habitually reading for limited bits of relevant information while leaving the rest to chance. This may not be desirable and certainly is far removed from the goal of developing insightful, critical readers and writers. But such goals are not the educational issue in the present literacy crisis.

THE SCHOOL'S REPORT CARD

The Creative Research Group's conclusion that half of their designated illiterates had a grade nine or better education calls into account the efficacy of the schools' reading programs. Again, however, the *Survey* contains contrary findings that show schools have done a better job of teaching reading and writing than the press might imagine. Having attacked the *Survey's* calculations, it may seem unfair to use those results to vindicate the work of the schools. I do so only to point out that Southam News, on its own evidence, had little cause to claim functional illiteracy was partly the product of "a flawed education system" (September 12, p. A2).

On closer analysis, these high school educated "false literates" fared especially poorly on the quantitative scale, where they were required to make calculations involving lunch menus and bank balances. This mathematical failing supports Fisher's conclusion (1981) that American measures of functional literacy are exercises in problem-solving as much as a measure of reading skill. Although greater instruction in problem-solving may still be needed, we live in a society that manipulates numbers almost exclusively with machines. This may have also contributed to the findings, which were intended to reflect on the state of reading education.

Although the *Survey* evidence is not conclusive about the school's role, the findings suggest that schools are doing better with each generation of students. With each increasingly older group, the literacy score fell when controlled for level of educational attainment (p. 82). The relationship between amount of schooling and achievement on the test-items also takes nothing from the school's contribution, with the largest gains made by the completion of grade nine (p. 79). If one assumes schools show their effects through students' achievement, then these figures indicate schools have improved in teaching literacy, although it may be too much to claim credit for the entire 44% reduction in "illiteracy" among high school graduates over a thirty-year period. Although the *Survey's* findings do not begin to answer the question how schools treat literacy, or what constitutes an effective or engaging program, the *Survey* data should not be used to identify flaws in the educational system.

CONCLUSION

It falls beyond the scope of this paper to balance this critique of the *Southam Literacy Survey* with the positive steps I think urgent in literacy instruction (see Willinsky, in press). I share Southam News' concern to increase public support for literacy, and yet I reject, as more cynical than is necessary, the assumption that a state of "crisis" *needs* to be created if important programs

are to gain the support of strapped policy makers and a parsimonious public. There are other means, and Peter Calamai's excellent coverage of adult literacy programs in the "Special Report" will certainly help. But to overdramatize the problem has other implications besides misleading the public. As constructed by the press, the literacy crisis has been employed to reinforce the sense of threat and marginalization of those outside the mainstream of middle-class Canadian society. It unduly reinforces the teaching of basic decoding skills as the literacy goal of the schools, even though the *Survey* points to the variety of different ways Canadians take to reading and writing as a social activity.

To guard against this crisis mentality, we should keep before us a broader concept of how Canadians employ literacy to represent, inform, engage, express, and entertain themselves. Without detracting from the importance of basic reading and writing skills as a first step, thought and planning has to be given to forms of literacy that take students beyond passive, efficient functioning in a post-industrial information society. To this end, I have exposed several limitations of the *Southam Literacy Survey*. The ultimate danger of the crisis syndrome—despite Southam News' good intentions and dubious calculations—is its tendency to demean both citizen and literacy. This is an impoverished way of stirring up policy makers and the public to begin building a better education in literacy.

NOTES

¹ The Southam chain includes *The Brantford Expositor*, *The Burlington Spectator*, *The Calgary Herald*, *The Citizen* (Prince George), *The Edmonton Journal*, *The Gazette* (Montreal), *The Kamloop News*, *The Medicine Hat News*, *The North Bay Nugget*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, *The Owen Sound Sun-Times*, *The Province* (Vancouver), *The Sault Star* (Sault Ste. Marie), *The Spectator* (Hamilton), *The Vancouver Sun*, and *The Windsor Star*. In addition, the following papers purchased the series: *The Brandon Sun*, *The Chronicle-Herald* (Halifax), *The Whig-Standard* (Kingston), *The Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, *The London Free Press*, *The Leader-Post* (Regina), *The Star-Phoenix* (Saskatoon), *The Telegraph-Journal* (Saint John), *The Toronto Star*, and *The Winnipeg Free Press*.

² Guthrie and Kirsch (1977–1978) found that functional literacy in the United States in the past 40 years from 1% (based on the American census and using six years of schooling as criterion) to 20% (based on literacy tests of adults over the last twenty years). Fisher (1981) has challenged the validity of functional literacy tests by pointing out how they confuse reading and information processing skills. Though the tests may still be a fair measure of functional adeptness, they misrepresent the literacy problem as a question of basic decoding.

³ Using the current grade nine cutoff, Thomas (1976) found Canadians' literacy went from 59% in 1961 to 72% in 1976, with Laver (1983) reporting it at 78%. By raising grade level requirements, one clouds this happy picture. Statistics Canada used grade five only 20 years ago. Arrow (1973) suggested that many industries see higher education standards as prerequisite to a supply of better disciplined

workers. A second problem with educational attainment is that grade nine students read at considerably different levels, with the rule of thumb that the spread equals the grade level. Sticht (1975) has found grade level and reading ability among army personnel to be weakly correlated. Finally, the "Survey of Leisure Activities and Reading Habits" conducted by Statistics Canada in 1978 found 78% of the adults who had less than a grade-nine education—that is, those officially designated as "illiterate"—claimed reading as one of their leisure activities (Graves & Kinsley, 1983).

⁴ The twenty key items consisted of (1) circling a traffic sign; (2) reading dosages on a medicine bottle; (3) applying for a job requiring personal information; (4) understanding job descriptions; (5) calculating the change from a lunch order; (6) in making out a cheque, writing the date; (7) writing to whom the cheque is payable; (8) writing a dollar amount as a number; (9) writing in words an amount; (10) taking a phone message; (11) writing the name of the caller; (12) writing the name of recipient of the call; (13) indicating "please call"; (14) signing one's name on social insurance card; (15) circling the expiry date on drivers licence; (16) filling out a meeting-room order form and identifying the appropriate reference person; (17) noting the meeting day; (18) writing the meeting date; (19) and writing the time of program; (20) circling a long distance charge on a telephone bill. Most items in the survey have not been released beyond these brief descriptions in order to allow further use of the test (CRG, 1987, Appendices).

⁵ Sharon (1973–1974) found that time spent reading the newspaper in the United States was 35 minutes per day with a newspaper readership of 73% of survey respondents. More recent data from the United States show a general decline in newspaper readership and time spent with the paper (Robinson, 1980).

⁶ An American example of how literacy scores become ideological fodder is former American Secretary of Education Bennett's claim that the modest rise in SAT scores during his term was "tangible evidence that the movement to raise standards and restore discipline is showing results" (Woodring, 1987, p. B1). Before 1900, many feared that widespread literacy would encourage discontent among the working classes (Donald, 1982).

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