

The Literacy of U.S. Adults with GED® Credentials: 2003 NAAL and 1992 NALS
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Abstract and Executive Summary

Abstract

Using data from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) and the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), this study provides evidence of the validity of the GED credential as an indication of achieving the literacy skills and knowledge equivalent to the skills and knowledge demonstrated by adults with high school diplomas.

Executive Summary

Adults who lack a high school diploma take the GED Tests to obtain certification of their level of academic knowledge and skills in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition, based on the intended use of GED Tests scores, adults who pass the GED Tests should show evidence of possessing a level of literacy skills comparable to adults with a high school diploma, which this study corroborates. Results therefore may aid adult education programs in evaluating their effectiveness through adult learners' performance on the GED Tests. Moreover, while previous studies also provided similar evidence, this study goes further by assessing the variability of adult literacy levels and trends for lower educational attainment groups across various demographic characteristics.

Using data from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) and the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), which were released by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and contain 19,258 and 25,468 respondents, respectively, this study focused on adults 16 years of age and older living in households or prisons in the U.S. and excluded adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities. Defining literacy as the ability to "us[e] printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential", NAAL and NALS measured English literacy skills in three areas – prose, document, and quantitative literacy –, covering a broad range of tasks and skills that adults encounter on a regular basis and represent real-world literacy tasks. In this study, literacy levels were analyzed for three lower educational attainment groups of adults: (1) adults with less than/some high school education, (2) adults with GED/high school equivalency credentials, and (3) adults who are high school graduates but did not pursue postsecondary education.

General and demographic characteristics of the three lower educational attainment groups include the following:

1. Between 1992 and 2003, the percentage of adults with less than/some high school education and the percentage of adults who completed high school but did not continue with a postsecondary education both decreased. Conversely, in the same time period, the percentage of adults with a GED/equivalency credential increased.
2. Among those who had less than/some high school education, the percentages of adults who were of Hispanic origin, out of the labor force or not employed full-time, immigrant, older than GED credential holders, non-English speakers or learnt to speak English after 11 years of age, and who spoke a language other than English or Spanish before starting school, were generally high.

3. The high school diploma holders were more likely to be white, 50 years and older, English speakers, and employed full time.
4. Adults with a GED/equivalency credential were overall younger than the adults in the other two groups. They were also significantly more likely to be born in the U.S., be English speakers, and employed full time than adults with less than/some high school education.

Results regarding English literacy skills levels achieved by the three lower educational attainment groups include the following:

1. The literacy skills levels achieved by adults with a GED/equivalency credential were similar to those achieved by high school graduates regardless of their ethnic group, gender, age group, country of birth, employment status, age they learnt to speak English, and language spoken before starting school.
2. The literacy skills levels achieved by adults with a GED/equivalency credential were significantly higher than those achieved by adults with less than/some high school education regardless of their ethnic group, gender, age group, country of birth, employment status, and language spoken before starting school.
3. It should be noted that among the adults with less than/some high school education, those of Hispanic origin and those who spoke only a language other than English or English-and -Spanish before starting school, consistently demonstrated the lowest average literacy levels across their respective demographic groups. Also within this group of adults, those who arrived in the U.S. after 19 years of age exhibited the lowest prose literacy level and that those adults who were not born in the U.S. were outperformed by adults who were born in the U.S. and earned a GED/equivalency credential.

Differences in English literacy levels achieved across 1992 and 2003 by the three lower educational attainment groups include the following:

1. The English literacy levels of adults with a GED/equivalency credential have generally been consistent across time. More specifically, their document and quantitative literacy skills have remained stable across all demographic characteristics.
2. While the prose literacy skills demonstrated by adults with a GED/equivalency credential did not significantly change either regardless of ethnicity, gender, age range, language spoken before starting school, country of birth, and employment status, these skills did significantly decrease when those adults arrived in the U.S. after 19 years of age or learned to speak English after 11 years of age.
3. Significant differences in literacy skill levels were found from 1992 to 2003 for adults with less than/some high school education. While many more significant decreases were seen than increases, decreases were especially noticed in the areas of prose and document literacy. Adults with less than/some high school education experienced decreases in both prose and document literacy when they were Hispanic, not born in the U.S., not English/Spanish speakers before starting school, employed full time, or arrived in the U.S. at or after 19 years of age. Moreover, they exhibited decreases in prose literacy only when they were 25 years of age or older, employed part time, or when they arrived in the U.S. before 18 years of age. Also,

adults between the ages of 25 and 39 within this specific group of adults decreased in document literacy only.

Conversely, increases for adults with less than/some high school education were mainly found in the document and quantitative literacy areas, and occurred especially for whites, adults who spoke English before starting school, and adults who learned English between the ages of one and 10. Lastly, blacks and adults who learned English after 10 years of age increased in only quantitative literacy, while adults who spoke English plus another language before starting school increased in only document literacy.

This study furthermore demonstrates that GED credential holders' literacy skills are not only significantly higher than that of adults without a high school diploma, but also that their literacy skills remained stable over time unlike that of the high school graduates and adults without a high school diploma.