



PUBLIC LIBRARY SUPPORT OF LOW LITERATE ADULTS

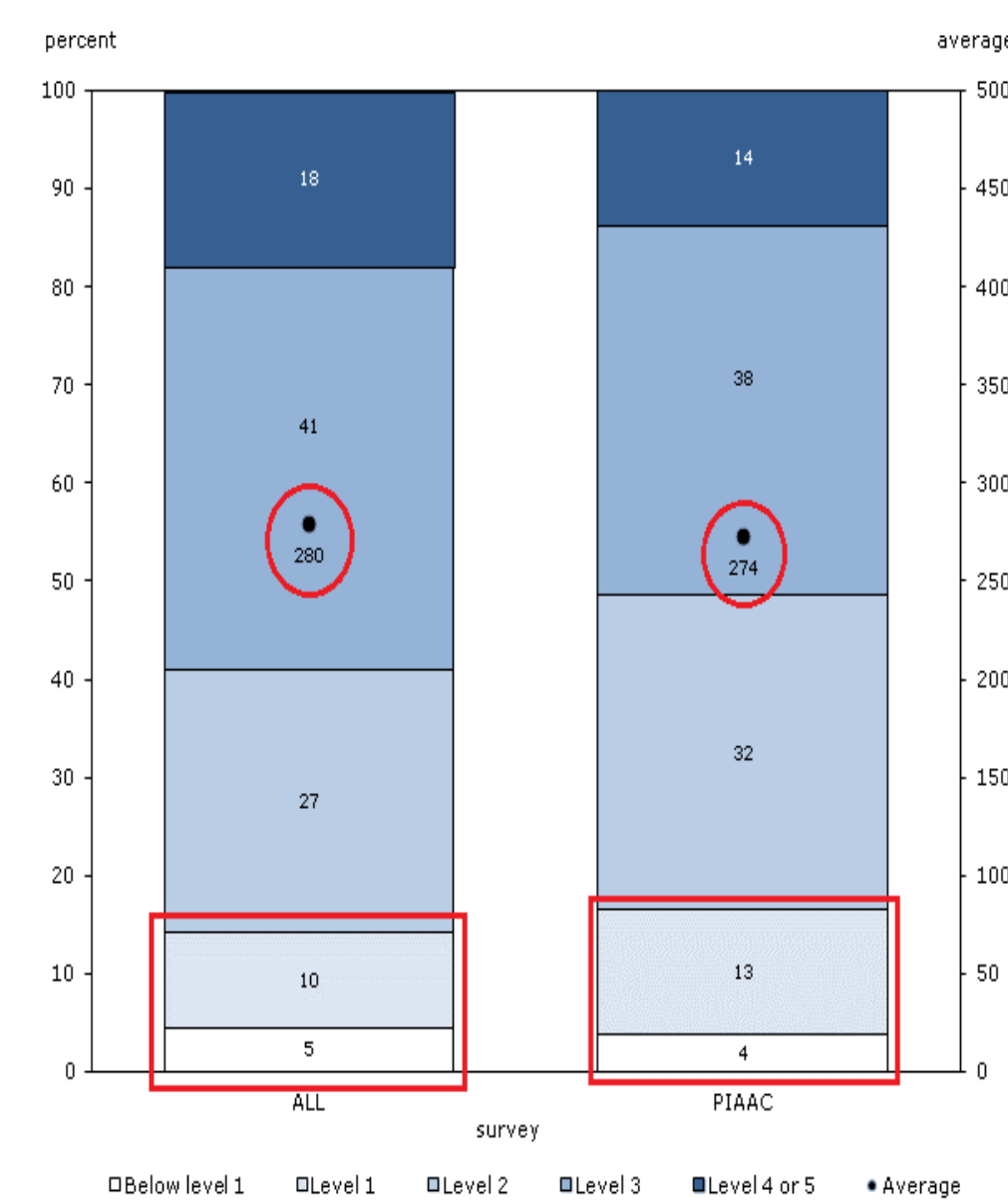
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INTRODUCTION

Adults with low levels of print literacy in western and developed nations and communities experience a variety of barriers which negatively impact their physical and mental health, relationships and their economic well-being. Low literate or illiterate adults might have experienced poverty, racial oppression, mental or physical disabilities, or disruption in or lack of education for varying reasons (i.e. war or civil unrest, prolonged illness, incarceration, bullying). Some, but not all, are English Language Learners who could have varying levels of literacy in their first languages. (Miller, Esposito, & McCardle, 2011; Harwood, 2012; Kong, 2013)

Chart 4.1a
Literacy – Averages and proficiency levels of population aged 16 to 65 in ALL and PIAAC, Canada, 2003 and 2012



Sources: The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 2012 and International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 2003. See Table B.4.1.

TRAIN'S FOUR TYPES OF LITERACY INTERVENTIONS (2003)

The library:

1. supports all existing basic needs groups.
2. identifies and reaches out to low literate adults
3. provides effective signposting, programs and events, and flexible service provision
4. provides ongoing support to literacy learners and tutors.

CONSTANCE MELLON'S THEORY OF LIBRARY ANXIETY

75-85% of students in each first year undergraduate English class described their **initial response to library use in terms of fear**, and described three themes of belief:



RESEARCH QUESTION

How do low literate adults perceive, experience and use the public library? In what ways (if any) are they encountering Train's four types of literacy interventions?

METHODS

One on one interviews were conducted with four low literate adults with varying backgrounds recruited via the Center for Family Literacy.

Nora recently immigrated to Canada on her own. She is highly literate in Arabic.

Alan recently immigrated to Canada with his young family, and is literate in French.

Rita is an established immigrant who arrived in Canada two decades ago with excellent language skills but no print literacy in any language.

Danielle was born and raised in Canada but has experienced learning disabilities throughout her life.

RESULTS

Experiences of library anxiety	¾ participants experienced library anxiety in the past, describing feelings of stigma, fear, confusion and embarrassment	"I was feeling stupid. And I didn't want an outsider person to know how stupid I was." -- Rita
Relationships with staff and information seeking	Difficulty accessing online and print information means that almost all of their library use is mediated through their experiences with library staff – whether they are positive or negative.	"The first time I came to this place I didn't know which, so I asked the staff and they told me 'here, you will find what you need.' --Nora
Social support and mediated introductions	Participants who were introduced to the library with social support experienced less anxiety and were treated with greater patience by library staff than those who entered alone.	"I had a sister come in and help me. She said 'Always ask the librarian!'" -- Danielle
Use of the library collection	At this point in their literacy journeys, all participants use print, CD and DVD materials to work on literacy skills, engage in lifelong learning, and entertain themselves.	"Because the library, I think they have everything inside." -- Alan

CONCLUSION

These participants currently perceive the public library as a positive part of their lives. They do not experience library anxiety, and they have experienced all four of Train's interventions. However, each participant spoke of an earlier time when they did experience library anxiety, which created a significant barrier to them. This anxiety was largely due to feelings of confusion in the space, assumptions by and the perceived attitudes of staff, and the stigma surrounding low literacy in Canada. This study demonstrates the high level of importance library staff play in the library use of adults with low levels of literacy, and these adults call upon staff to be aware of them, seek them out, and treat them with patience and respect.

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