

Fall Institute 2011

IALS (INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY)

ITS MEANING AND IMPACT FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

OCTOBER 23-25, 2011

BANFF, AB

IALS in Norway

Author:

Egil Gabrielsen

Associate Professor

Center for Reading Research

University of Stavanger

Document category:

Country story

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Egil Gabrielsen:

I am an Associate Professor at the Center for Reading Research at the University of Stavanger and I was the National Study Manager in Norway both for IALS and ALL. Our center is a national one that provides courses in the literacy field all over Norway. In addition, we work with teacher education and with students at different levels: Master and Ph.D. I am now a member of the PIAAC research group in Norway and the Nordic countries.

The framework for this presentation is the following:

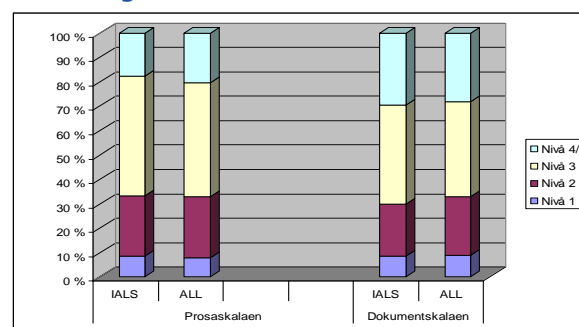
- A brief presentation of the Norwegian IALS results
- The Norwegian “Sputnik shock”
- The “‘at risk’ group” discussion
- Follow-up studies concerning the “At-risk” group in Norway
- Consequences for the educational system
- Expectations for PIAAC

A brief presentation of the Norwegian results

Norway took part in the third IALS round, with 8 other countries. The data were collected in 1998 and the results published in 2000. We also participated in ALL 2003, and the results were published in 2005.

When the results from IALS were published there was, of course, great satisfaction with Norway being among the countries with the highest average scores. Only Sweden, our neighbour and rival in many fields, showed significantly better scores than Norway. As you can see on this slide, the results were at the same level five years later – when the ALL-results were published.

Norwegian results on IALS and ALL



However, there was a lot of concern about the 30 to 40 percent of our adult population who showed inadequate literacy skills, according to OECD criteria. 40 percent were at level 1 or 2 on the numeracy scale in ALL.

One question was frequently asked: Why didn't we improve our average scores from IALS (1998) to ALL (2003)? In Norway the ALL-survey was done in 2003, five years after IALS (1998). This means that the age-group 61 – 65 in IALS was no longer in the target-group in 2003. They were replaced by a younger cohort of 16 – 20 years old (who had been 11-15 years of age and not in the target group in 1998). Since younger cohorts score better than the cohorts 45+, one could perhaps have expected a small rise in the average literacy-score. This was not the result and the best explanation for this could be a higher percentage of non-western immigrants in 2003 compared to 1998.

The Norwegian “Sputnik shock”:

What I call the Norwegian “Sputnik shock” does not refer to the IALS results in 2000, but to three other surveys, the results of which were shocking for Norwegian pupils in 2001.

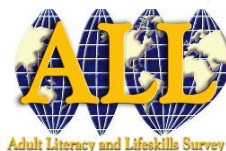
The context was this: After a lengthy political debate, in 1997, children in Norway started compulsory schooling at the age of 6 – one year earlier than had been the case since compulsory school was established as far back as 1739.

This was the result of a political compromise, namely that the first year at school should be grounded on kindergarten philosophy, meaning language training and playing, but no reading instruction. To emphasize this, kindergarten teachers were expected to work hand-in-hand with school-teachers in the first and second grades.

The Center for Reading Research has developed a reading test for children aged 9, that is for second graders prior to the 97-reform, and for third graders after 1997. The purpose of the test was to identify weak readers and be able to help them at an early stage and put them “on track”. The test was used at almost every primary school in Norway. It was standardized in 1994, but since the 1997 reform also included new curricula and plans for both the primary and secondary schools, there was an obvious need to re-standardize the test.

And this is when the first Norwegian Sputnik shock came: The results showed that pupils who had started school at the age of six and had been in school for nearly three years, had lower average scores than the group who had started at the age of seven. A significantly lower percentage reached “the ceiling” of the test, that is “all correct”, and a much higher percentage fell into the “at risk” group.

Shortly after the publication of these results, the results from the first PISA round (15-year-olds) and from PIRLS (10-year-olds) were published. The Norwegian results were quite bad; roughly around the international average, and far behind our neighbor countries Finland and Sweden.



In 2001, a hot issue for our politicians and the school authorities was: “What have we done to our school-system? We thought it was one of the best in the world.”

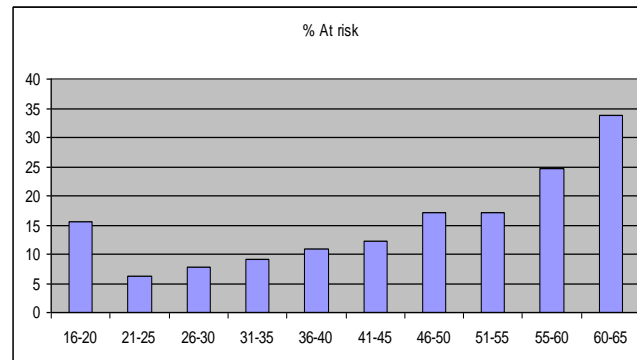
Let there be no doubt: The results had an enormous impact on the political debate in the years that followed. They also had impact on the primary and secondary school system as well as the curricula and the teacher education over the last decade.

To summarize: The concern for children and youth for a while overshadowed concern for all the adults with low literacy skills.

The “at risk-group” discussion

In Norway it has been very difficult to explain and get acceptance of the fact that both level 1 and level 2 are included in the “at risk” group, according to the OECD criteria. Even though our results, as noted, were among the best, both in IALS and ALL, they showed that more than one third of our adult population did not reach an acceptable level of literacy and numeracy competence. This is of course good news for people working in the field of special education, **but it gives a hopeless signal when we want to focus on remedial actions.** 40 percent of the adult population needs help, many of whom are not even aware of it! According to Sticht (2001) the strict OECD criteria could be an obstacle for the adults who are most in need of remedial action. He also recommends that one should take into account the age-variable when defining the “at risk”-group.

At risk-group and age (level 1 on at least one scale)

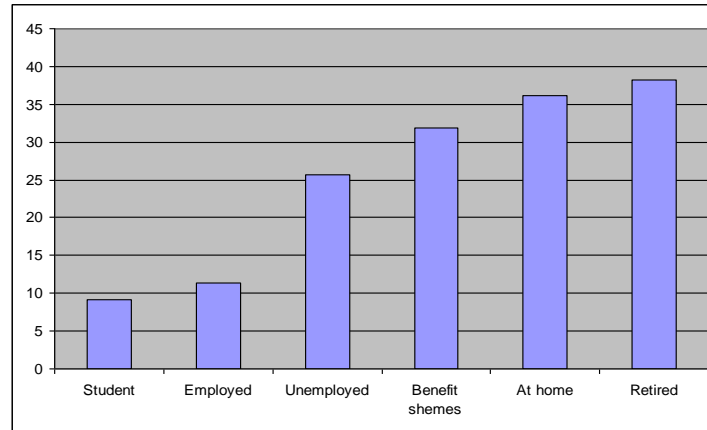


A “softer” approach to this challenge was therefore introduced in Norway. Adults with a level 1 score on at least one of the three scales were defined as the “at-risk” group. This reduced the group from 33 to 13 percent (IALS) and from 40 to 15 percent (ALL). We still present and explain the OECD criteria when we comment on the Norwegian results, but we do not include all level 2 individuals in what we define as the “at risk”-group. This approach seems to be more acceptable and intelligible both at the ministerial and public level. Nevertheless, we are talking about 450 000 adults in a country with less than 5 million people, that used to be proud of its educational system.

Follow-up studies focusing on the “At-risk” group in Norway

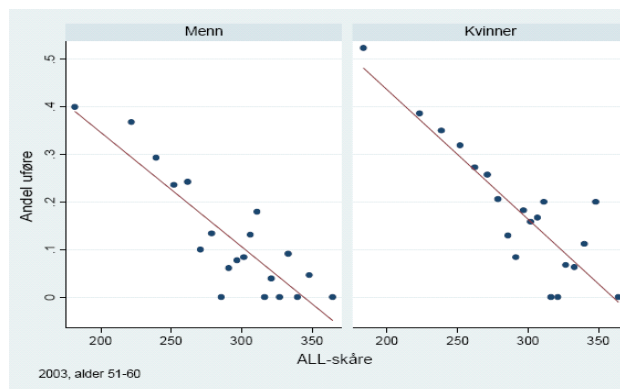
We have identified three cohorts in what we have now defined as the “at risk” group (level 1 on at least 1 scale). The first one is the unemployed group. Traditionally, the unemployment rate in Norway has been very low. During the last three decades it has never been above 5 percent; today it is around 3 percent. As in other countries, quite a high percentage, 25 %, of the unemployed group belongs to the “at risk” group.

At risk group and employment status



The second cohort consists of adults receiving disability benefits. This group is quite large in Norway; close to 10 percent of the adult population in the national workforce (25 to 65-year-olds) are in this group. Some may argue that we have to see this group in connection with the unemployed group; in a way these high numbers could explain the low unemployment rate. There is, as you can imagine, a lot of concern around this expanding group in our country. Is it too easy to obtain disability benefits in Norway? And are the amounts received too generous compared to low-paid jobs? What will happen to our welfare system the day the guest workers from Sweden, Poland and from other eastern-European countries return to their homeland? The political intention has been to reduce the percentage of adults on disability benefits - the numbers are rising every year - and the highest rise can be found among those under 30 years of age. This has caused a lot of worry.

Benefit scheme 51 – 60 years of age (Bratsberg, Hægeland & Raam, 2006)

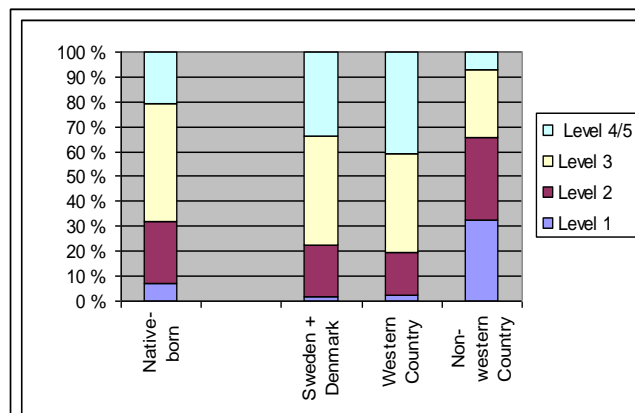


This slide shows an interesting analysis. Each of these dots represents 5 percent of females and males between 51 and 60 years old. On the x-axis you can see the average ALL-score (all four scales included), and on the y-axis is the percentage of people receiving disability benefits. As you can see, among the 10 percent lowest scoring group, a very high percentage receive disability benefits, just below 40 percent among males and around 45 percent among females.

The third group I will focus on is the immigrant group, which in Norway is defined as persons born abroad, or who have parents born outside Norway. This is a fast expanding group in Norway.



Immigrants in Norway Results on the Document scale



In 2003, when the ALL study was run, approximately 6 % were included in this group. Our analyses were quite interesting, showing that immigrants from Sweden and Denmark (representing 0.5 percent of the population) were on average better readers than the ethnic Norwegian population. This was also the result for the group defined as immigrants from western countries. This could be explained by the fact that many in these groups are highly educated individuals who could, for instance, be working in the expanding oil-related industry.

The largest group, however, as you can see from this picture, is the non-western immigrant group, and here there is a much higher percentage belonging to the “at risk” group. Norway has not succeeded in including many of these people in the workforce and in teaching them Norwegian to an acceptable standard.

Consequences for the educational system in Norway

There is no doubt that the international surveys run during the last decade have had a great impact on the educational system in our country.

A new curriculum for both the primary and the secondary education was established in 2006, focusing heavily on basic skills. This reform includes a lot of testing for all pupils during the full ten years of mandatory primary and secondary school. This is a new trend for our country; we are not used to much testing and it has become a hot political issue. The main purpose for this is, of course, to identify pupils in danger of being left behind when it comes to literacy and numeracy skills. The critical voices are focusing on the negative consequences, such as it being time-consuming, the negative effects of rankings between schools and municipalities and also the tendency to teach to the test.

Since 2002, adults with low basic skills have had a legal right to attend free study programs at primary, secondary and upper-secondary levels. Municipalities are responsible for organizing and paying for the programs at primary and secondary levels and the counties (we have 19 of them) are responsible for providing upper-secondary education. This system does not function according to the intentions. A report from the Auditor General from 2008 was very critical and demonstrated that there are great discrepancies between the municipalities and the counties as to how they have informed the public and organized this reform. Nevertheless, it is a legal right.

A new program called *Basic Skills for Working Life* was introduced by the government in 2005 as a follow-up to the publication of the results from IALS and ALL. This program allows both public and private businesses to apply for money to start courses for employees with low basic skills. A lot of people have participated in these courses and the budget has been expanded every year since the program started.

In connection to the Basic Skills program we have also cooperated with the Educational Testing Service in the US and translated the individually-based assessment (PDQ) to Norwegian. This test is currently being used as a tool to identify adults with insufficient basic skills.

The challenge

The challenge in Norway too is, of course, how to reach adults in the “at risk” group. This is a difficult task since so many of those with low basic skills are not aware of their problem. These slides show that 60% of adults on level 1 in IALS in Norway are either very satisfied or satisfied with their literacy-skills. This goes for all three age-cohorts and corresponds to the findings in Denmark (Arnbak, 2004). For one reason or another, we did not ask the same question in ALL, but my guess is that the result would be almost the same.

Norwegian level 1-readers evaluating their own literacy-skills

Age-group	Very good	Good	Average	Bad	%
16 - 30	19	43	31	7	%
31 - 44	23	42	29	6	%
45 - 65	22	45	29	5	%

Expectations for PIAAC

Finally I want to say a few words about the Norwegian expectations for PIAAC.

We do look forward to being able to compare our results with data from IALS and ALL. For Norway the period between IALS and ALL was five years, and the period from ALL to PIAAC will be eight years. We also appreciate the expansion of the survey: e.g. that we will have more detailed information concerning adults on level 1 and also the inclusion of digital texts.

The international comparisons are of a much greater interest this time, since 25 countries will be running the survey in the same time period.

The Nordic comparisons are of course of special interest to us. There was great disappointment in Norway when the other Nordic countries finally decided not to participate in ALL. However, the positive response from our Nordic neighbours was an important argument for our ministry in favour of participating in PIAAC. It has been thirteen years since Denmark and Finland participated in IALS and seventeen since Sweden took part in the first IALS round.

We will have a special focus on the youngest cohorts. Will the PIAAC results reflect the low Norwegian scores for PIRLS and PISA? And what about the migrant population: Have they improved their results? These are matters of great concern in our country.

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