

This report describes the performance of 23,680 English- and French-speaking 13-year-old and 16-year-old Canadian students from 17 jurisdictions<sup>4</sup> across Canada in the SAIP Writing III Assessment (2002). This pan-Canadian writing assessment is the second of four SAIP subject assessments to be administered for the third time using essentially the same criteria but following an extensive revision of the framework and of the instruments themselves.

The assessment instruments were designed, developed, and reviewed by representatives of the jurisdictions, working together under the leadership of the development team. This assessment was also made possible by the cooperation extended to the development team by students, teachers, parents, and stakeholder representatives.

In spite of the diversity of student circumstances and educational experiences in the jurisdictions, this challenging exercise produced a comprehensive assessment of student writing, composed for a specific purpose in a specific context. In addition, a second study was undertaken of students' critical habits of mind through a brief written response to text used to introduce the theme of the writing, *Sharing Living Spaces*.

The theme of the resource booklet and writing activity, *Sharing Living Spaces*, was intended as a cross-curricular theme linking environmental, scientific, social, and political information and issues relevant to both classrooms and local communities. It was intended to take the assessment out of the language arts classroom and place it in the larger context of writing needs for learning and living, both in school and in the broader community.

## General Results of the Two Age Groups

Given that 13-year-olds and 16-year-olds write the same assessment, the SAIP designers assumed that the largest proportion of the younger group would achieve at least level 2 and the largest proportion of the older group would achieve at least level 3 of the five-point scale. A large proportion of 13-year-olds did reach level 2 or above, while a majority of 16-year-olds reached level 3 or above. Notably more than 40% of the younger students also reached level 3 or above, while more than 20% of older students performed at levels 4 and 5.

To be assigned a level 3, the student writing had to demonstrate at least a control of the elements of writing appropriate to purpose. Writing at this level is generally integrated, and the development is generalized, functional, and maintained. It conveys a clear perspective. More specifically, the overall idea(s) and development are straightforward and clear, but may be more general than specific. The point of view expressed through choice of language and writing style is clear and appropriate. There is a control of the conventions of language, and any errors do not interfere with communication.

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<sup>4</sup>These include all ten provinces, two territories (Yukon and Northwest Territories), and five provinces with anglophone and francophone populations.

## Public Expectations

In 2002, a pan-Canadian panel of representatives of various sectors of society determined a set of expectations to help interpret the results actually achieved by the students. The 13-year-olds matched these public expectations almost exactly except at the highest level of performance. The 16-year-olds also met public expectations except at level 3 or better where they were approximately 10% below the public anticipation. This may indicate that generally Canadian school jurisdictions have established standards of expectation in writing aligned with public anticipation.

## Age and Gender Differences

As expected, the older students performed better than the younger students. This does suggest that the curriculum and classroom practices with regard to writing do foster improved levels of writing skill between the ages of 13 and 16.

For many jurisdictions, the gender gap in performance between girls and boys is a well-known concern. Professional conferences and curriculum reviews at the jurisdictional level have been organized specifically to address the issue. In addition, concerns have been raised at the international level following recent international evaluation initiatives. Aware of the difference between the performance results of boys and girls in the 1998 SAIP Writing assessment, the development team designed a writing activity that would take the writing out of the language arts classroom and into the science and social studies arena. The assumption was that boys would be more motivated to engage in such writing demands and that this would lead to results commensurate with those of girls. Results from this administration would seem to bear out this assumption. The performance differences between 13-year-old boys and girls in 2002 were slightly less than the differences in 1998. The performance differences for 16-year-olds in 2002 were larger than the differences in 1998 at levels 1, 2, and 3 and smaller at levels 4 and 5. However, even where the gender difference increased in 2002, the differences between male and female students is below 20%.

## Jurisdiction Results

There are some pan-Canadian trends worth noting in the individual jurisdiction results.

- Generally, there is a consistent distribution of the five levels of performance across the jurisdictions.
- While direct comparisons of the 2002 performance results with those from previous administrations are not advisable and are not made in this public report, there is value in comparing the percentage differential between jurisdictional performance and pan-Canadian results for each assessment. For example, where francophone jurisdictions perform below the Canadian French results or anglophone jurisdictions perform below the Canadian English results, generally the difference is less than it was in 1998. This is particularly true for 13-year-olds in those francophone jurisdictions where French is the minority language.
- Similarly, where there are differences between 13-year-old boys and girls in a jurisdiction, generally, the percentage differential is less than it was in 1998.

## The Secondary Study

In curriculum reform of the past decade, Canadian jurisdictions have embedded the generic skills of critical thinking and metacognition in statements of expectations and performance standards, in recommended classroom practice, in learning processes, and in formative assessment learning tools. However, while these changes have occurred internationally as well as in Canada, little has been done to develop assessment instruments to determine the validity of these changes. What form of instrument would allow for assessment of the successful implementation and learning of critical habits of mind?

In addition, it is a common assumption that a central cognitive activity linking reading and writing is the thinking process. We come to understand and revise our thinking through acts of literacy such as writing. What can be learned by correlating an instrument to assess habits of mind with an instrument to assess writing skills?

The SAIP Writing III development team decided to take initial steps in constructing a limited but valuable tool to study how thinking unfolds when students are asked to respond to a simple but thought-provoking text. The developers hypothesized that cultivated habits of mind would be associated with higher levels of writing performance. As well, the descriptions of each code in the coding instrument reflect the current practices and curriculum expectations for inquiry, analysis, interpretation, explanation, and evaluation. However, the descriptions of students' habits of mind used in coding the responses are neither precise nor refined enough to measure the quality of student thinking. The descriptions are broad: they simply identify whether a student demonstrated a willingness to engage in interpretation, elaboration, and evaluation in response to a given text.

It is important to note that no standards or expectations have been established to determine the strength or weakness of the various data percentages. What percentage of 16-year-olds should tend to take up critical thinking when engaging with a particular text? Critical thinking is a sophisticated human act, and, on the evidence, more than a third of 16-year-olds demonstrated a propensity to apply critical judgment. Similarly, what percentage of 13-year-olds should understand that it is not enough to merely express a meaning, that one should also explain and justify the meaning? This is also a significant growth in the development of critical thinking, and two-thirds of 13-year-olds demonstrated such an act of elaboration.

The 13-year-olds' responses demonstrated the least difference in habits of mind between girls and boys. However, among 16-year-olds, where there were differences between males and females, the percentages were considerably below the current trends in literacy assessments. With a de-emphasis on writing quality and a focus on thinking practices exhibited in the responses, male and female students were apparently more equal in habits of mind than in writing. This is significant when one compares habits of mind demonstrated to performance levels achieved in the main writing task.

Generally, the secondary study tends to confirm what cognitive scientists and researchers into critical thinking have suggested. Students who practise higher-level habits of mind, in particular full exploration of an issue and critical judgment, also demonstrate higher levels of literacy. In this assessment, levels of literacy are found in the levels of writing performance. Those who are able to offer a viable interpretation of a text tend to demonstrate a higher level of writing than those who cannot. Similarly, students who understand that an observation or meaning requires explanation or justification perform at higher levels of writing than those who do not. As well, while fewer students are inclined to offer a judgment of meaning in a text, those who do perform at still higher levels of writing than those who do not. This assessment cannot establish which element might be the cause and which the effect. It has offered a glimpse of the horizon of possibility when habits of mind are examined in the same landscape as writing performance. Furthermore, it has offered an instrument to bridge reading and writing assessment with a key element of both these skill domains, namely, the act of thinking. However, it is only a small step toward opening a door of understanding as jurisdictions strive to cultivate general skills for lifelong learning and successful living.