



SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT INDICATORS PROGRAM (SAIP)

Student Writing: The Canadian Context 2002

Highlights

The School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) was conceived in 1989 by members of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) as a program of pan-Canadian assessments of student performance in core subjects, assessments that would be administered on a cyclical basis to measure student achievement over time in mathematics, reading and writing, and science. Two complete cycles were conducted in the 1990s, Cycle I between 1993 and 1996, and Cycle II between 1997 and 1999 with two age groups, 13-year-olds and 16-year-olds.

The third cycle began with Mathematics III in 2001 and has continued in 2002 with Writing III. This domain was previously assessed as part of the Reading and Writing assessments carried out in 1994 and 1998, but for Cycle III, Writing was separated out for assessment on its own. Reading, too, will be assessed separately, in 2005.

Approximately 24,000 thirteen- and sixteen-year-old students, working in either English or French, participated in the Writing III assessment on test items and instruments designed, developed, and reviewed by representatives from the participating provinces and territories. Some modifications were made to the previous SAIP writing assessment instruments and to the scoring procedures in order to reflect current pedagogical practices. Although the essence of the assessment and the scoring criteria remained, the changes were significant enough that comparisons with writing assessments of student performance in the 1990s are not pursued in this report. Also for the 2002 assessment, a new task was added to link critical thinking skills to the skills associated with writing. Analysis of the results from this exploratory study are included as “The Secondary Study” at the end of the public report.

In spring 2002, a total of 17 different populations participated, representing all provinces and two territories. (Nunavut did not participate.) After completing the writing tasks in the assessments, students continued on to respond to the student questionnaire included in their test package. Just under 1,700 schools took part in the assessment, and their principals responded to the school questionnaire. All teachers who taught Language Arts during the 2001–02 school year to the participating students (about 5,000 teachers) responded to the teacher questionnaire.

The purpose of these questionnaires was to generate contextual information that could link the students’ achievement levels with factors that could be identified as relevant to writing skills and abilities. The main categories addressed in these questionnaires were Jurisdictional/District Context, Out-of-School Context, School, Student Information, Program Design, Teacher Information, and Classroom Instruction and Climate.

This report examines some of the highlights of the data gathered from principal, teacher, and student questionnaires covering a great number of variables that might be expected to be associated with writing achievement.

The analyses presented in this report appear in three sections corresponding to the three questionnaires. The descriptive text is accompanied by bar graphs, with separate bars for each student population. Five provinces show results for the two official language groups. Additionally, the two age groups are identified, when possible.

Although results have been presented by jurisdiction, the emphasis in this report is on finding relationships that are reasonably stable across jurisdictions. In reality, achievement is influenced by a large number of factors, many of which are themselves interrelated. A more comprehensive analysis will be required to fully investigate these interrelationships, the possible cumulative effects of the various factors, and the possibility that some factors may function differently in different jurisdictions.

The analyses in this report should stimulate discussion about important features of our schools, teachers, and students and lead to more detailed exploration of the factors associated with higher achievement in writing.

Notable Features

From these data, the following features of the teaching and learning of writing in Canada are identified in the Conclusions section of the report.

- Less than 50% of students spend one hour or more per week reading for enjoyment, with some differences among populations in this activity.
- The most prevalent out-of-school writing activities are using e-mail and chatting on the Internet. However, a variety of other activities, such as writing letters to friends or pen pals, writing in a journal or diary, and writing stories were engaged in by 20% to 40% of students overall.
- Common classroom writing activities such as writing on a variety of topics, practising different forms of writing, and discussing examples of good writing were reported as frequently occurring by a large majority of students. The study of formal grammar and syntax occurs more often in francophone than in anglophone classes.
- Students reported spending an average of 15 hours per week watching television. The 13-year-olds reported more television watching than 16-year-olds and anglophone students more than francophone students.
- The range of student abilities in the classroom is widely perceived as a challenge by Language Arts teachers.

- Overall, fewer than half the teachers assign Language Arts homework three or four times a week or more. Even fewer expect that each homework assignment take 30 minutes or more. The most common homework activities are writing essays or narratives, editing and proofreading texts, working on long-term writing projects, and preparing oral reports. There are wide jurisdictional and language differences in how teachers mark, record, and use homework assignments.
- The results for the opportunity-to-learn section of the teacher questionnaire suggest that writing is viewed by teachers as consisting of a set of generic skills that may be taught in greater depth over time but are not taught in sequence as discrete topics.
- Language Arts classes for 16-year-olds are more differentiated than those for 13-year-olds, with more streaming, more semestering, and more teacher specialization at age 16.
- Student/computer ratios in schools vary from 3 to 8 students per computer. Availability of a dedicated computer room where Language Arts can be taught is more prevalent in anglophone than in francophone schools.
- In relation to overall achievement in this SAIP Writing III assessment, girls outperform boys. Although this has been a source of concern for some time, the results show that this issue is not resolved.
- Higher achievement is associated with higher socioeconomic status and high educational aspirations, and with speaking the language of the test at home. Time spent on homework and reading for enjoyment are also positively associated with achievement in writing.
- A variety of student background variables reported by the principal, particularly the proportions of students in the school with learning problems, from single parent families, and having health or nutrition problems are negatively associated with achievement, particularly for 16-year-old students.