Can you read as well as a ten-year-old?

Adults in rich countries are less literate than they were a decade ago. That requires attention.
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Does it often feel as if the world is getting stupider? Data released on December 10th by the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries, suggest this may not be all in your head. Roughly every ten years the organisation asks adults in dozens of places to sit tests in numeracy and literacy. The questions it poses are not abstract brainteasers, spelling tests or mental arithmetic. They aim to mimic problems people aged 16-65 face in daily life, whether they are working in a factory or an office, or simply trying to make sense of the news. The latest tests were carried out in 31 rich countries, and their findings are unnerving. They suggest that a fifth of adults do no better in maths and reading than might be expected of a primary-school child. The direction of travel is even less encouraging. In maths, average scores have risen in a few places over the past ten years, but fallen in almost as many. In literacy, a lot more countries have seen scores decline than advance, despite the fact that adults hold more and higher educational qualifications than ever before.

Demographic change offers some explanation. New immigrants often struggle with a new language. The native-born have ageing brains. But even after adjusting for this, trends remain gloomy, especially in literacy. Some speculate that Netflix, video games and social media are sapping acuity. It is just as likely that education and training systems have misfired.
These disappointing results deserve more attention than they are likely to get. Basic numeracy and literacy are oddly unfashionable causes—especially when adults lack them. Students of education prefer to debate how to teach fashionable “soft skills”. Hype around generative artificial intelligence does not help: harping on about the importance of times-tables seems even more fuddy-duddy when talking robots promise to do all the hard work.

Yet a century of technological upheaval has not cut demand for people who are good with numbers, or who have a way with words. Adults who do badly in the OECD’s tests earn vastly less than those who ace them. They are also in poorer health, less satisfied with their life, less trusting of others and more likely to feel that they have no voice in politics. In many countries the gap in ability between the highest- and lowest-skilled grown-ups is widening (not because smarty-pants are doing better, but because the least able are doing worse). Writ large, such trends lead nowhere good.

What to do? Improving lessons for children is the surest way of creating more capable grown-ups; governments ought to start there. England’s adults have crept up the OECD’s league table, mostly because the youngest ones (aged 16-24) are scoring better than before. That may reflect reforms which have made exams for older teenagers more difficult, and begun requiring youngsters who fail them to try again. In America, which has done fairly badly, states are junking tests that were in the past used to determine who graduated from high school. Grades there are inflating unchecked.

The second task is to oil creaking systems for educating adults. These hand dropouts second chances; they also serve people who change careers and help migrants integrate. Yet politicians grant them paltry budgets, in part because they underestimate the trickiness of what they are being asked to accomplish. People with the weakest skills tend to have the least time and money for self-improvement. They are less likely to attend adult classes, or get training, even though they are the most in need.

In too many places a mania for universities has sapped funding and focus from all the other kinds of lessons that people aged 18 and above could be offered. Degrees are becoming less meaningful: the OECD has found that even some university graduates post numeracy and literacy scores that might embarrass a child. Meanwhile, oldies who want to return to class without embarking on long, expensive university courses often find good alternatives are lacking. Accelerating efforts to fix all these problems seems like a bright idea.

703 words