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Editorial

Skills assessment, PIAAC and the adult literacy agenda

On 8 October 2013, the first results of PIAAC's international report were launched (OECD, 2013a). PIAAC, the *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* is an international survey, under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which aims to measure—as the OECD itself puts it—‘the key cognitive and workplace skills needed for individuals to participate in society and for economies to prosper’ (<http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/surveyofadultskills.htm>).

OECD support for cross-country surveys of this kind is not new. Our readers will be familiar with the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS), which it organized in cooperation between Statistics Canada and OECD (2000). Approximately 20 countries were involved over the three rounds of IALS (1994, 1996 and 1998): from Europe, North America (Canada, USA), South America (Chile) and Oceania (Australia, New Zealand). This led to an international ordering of literacy proficiency, setting an international benchmark at Level 3, construed as ‘the level considered by experts as a suitable minimum level for coping with the increasing demands of the emerging knowledge society and information economy’ (Statistics Canada and OECD, 2005, p. 31).

Similarly, Statistics Canada and the OECD (2005, 2011) ran the *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (ALL) in 2003, 2006 and 2008, with the participation of 10 countries from Europe, North America and Oceania. While fewer countries participated, and less attention has been paid to the results, ALL represented a first attempt to move towards longitudinal studies of adult skills (rather than literacy alone), by expanding its coverage to include problem-solving.

Searches run on the ERIC database result in more than 1100 articles in peer-reviewed journals that either centre attention on, or make important references to, IALS, and over 20 look closely at ALL. Some of this literature investigates the impact and public policy implications of such surveys on participating countries, such as New Zealand (Benseman, 2006); some uses national ALL data-sets to explore cross-skills relationships within national populations (Aro & Olkinuora, 2007).

Another part questions the underlying epistemological and theoretical assumptions in the design and interpretation of these data, arguing that such surveys are geared towards precise labour-market needs (Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000), or reflect ethnocentrically Western attitudes that favour certain ways of treating information and obscure the alternatives on which people rely in their everyday lives (Gomez, 2000). Such views can be contrasted with a literature that tests and proves the validity of the literacy construct on which these surveys rely (Boudard

& Jones, 2003) or the accuracy of the relationships between levels of adult skills and national and individual well being (Darcovich, 2000).

The above accounts are supplemented by exploitation of the data produced (and made available for research purpose) through these surveys for cross-country comparisons. These studies examine cross-national differences in adult skills in order to explore, among others, possible explanations in terms of labour-market regimes (Carbonaro, 2006) or possible predictors of school drop-out among younger generations (Lundetrae, 2011). Most of these adopt a 'positivist epistemological approach' (Garrouste, 2008).

More recently, further critical, supportive and apparently neutral arguments about the gains or losses derived from these surveys have been advanced. However other strands of research have emerged. In particular, recent studies discuss the use of survey series to document change over time, and make international comparisons, in order to 'inform users' of what these data 'can, and cannot, provide' (St. Clair, 2012); they raise concerns about the growing interconnectedness of measuring and assessing adult literacy skills across scales (Hamilton, 2013); they explore the issue of performance measures and the 'power of numbers' in legitimizing national literacy strategies (Tett, 2013); and they point to the 'glueing' power of media coverage which tightens the link between adult skills measurements and the progress of government policies (Walker & Rubenson, 2013).

Influential sources of inspiration have been found in governance studies that draw attention to the process of 'governing by number' (Grek, 2009; Miller, 2001) or 'ranking and rating' (Martens & Niemann, 2010). These theoretical approaches attempt to comprehend the impact of analogous cross-country surveys conducted by the OECD, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) on national education reforms.

Drawing on sociological studies, Miller (2001, p. 379) argued that calculative practices represent a technology of government that 'alter the capacities of agents, organizations and connections among them', and thus 'enable new ways of acting upon and influencing the action' of individual actors and institutions. Similar reasoning lead Martens and Niemann (2010) and Grek (2009), with regard to PISA, to contend that the OECD, like other international organizations, strengthens its power position when government hand over the task of undertaking 'objective' evaluations. Such evaluations as occur, for instance, through the publication of comparative analysis, set standards that can be relatively independent of what governments originally intended to evaluate.

Since the 1990s, as Martens and Niemann (2010) notice, ranking and rating has become a predominant phenomenon across policy fields and issue areas.

R&Rs [rankings and ratings] are far from new. What is fairly new, however, is their application and continuous expansion in academic fields and to political institutions. Today, R&Rs are used for states, state performance in certain policy fields, and state institutions. The results have become very popular and often initiate public debates, as R&Rs create an air of competition around performance or policy by attributing relative positions. Whereas many comparative analyses are applied without the agreement of those being ranked (for example, the corruption index), there are other

forms of rankings and ratings to which explicit consent must be given. (Martens & Niemann, 2010, p. 6)

Adherence by governments to surveys like PIAAC is just one example of how explicit consensus may occur. In fact, twenty-three countries took part in PIAAC's first round (2008–2013), including most European countries, Canada, the United States of America, Japan, Korea, Australia and the Russian Federation (an OECD partner). A further nine joined its second round (2012–2016) from within the European Union (EU) (Greece, Lithuania—an OECD partner—and Slovenia), Europe more widely, Asia and the Middle East (Indonesia, Israel, Singapore, Turkey), Oceania (New Zealand) and South America (Chile). More countries are being recruited by the OECD for a third round this year.

As mentioned above, the first results of PIAAC were released by the OECD only few months ago (OECD, 2013a, 2013b). So there has been to date very little, if any, independent evaluation of the data available; nor can we judge whether, or how, PIAAC will affect adult education policy and practice. Yet, as simple observers of events we notice that months before the public release of the first results a 'noise' was spreading across international organizations and professional organizations about PIAAC's results putting 'literacy back on the European agenda'.

At a joint event organized in Brussels by the OECD and the EU to mark the launch of the first PIAAC's results (8 October 2013), the European Commission published a short document presenting key results of PIAAC for Europe, in which it discusses the implications for education and training policies (EC, 2013). It asserts that

For future rounds of the Survey, the EU Member States' participation cost can be financed by the Structural Funds. (EC, 2013, p. 26)

In addition, collaboration between the OECD and ETS led to the organization of a PIAAC Research Conference on the importance of skills and how to assess them, hosted in Washington, DC on 13–15 November 2013. Among other things, invitees, including representatives of governmental and inter-governmental institutions, were presented with a series of additional analytical inputs by PIAAC's project coordinators and analysts. (ETS is a US-born non-profit organization with subsidiary offices in Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, Middle East and Africa and the Asia Pacific region, whose mission is to develop, administer and score tests; tasks that ETS performs in more than 180 countries worldwide!)

Last but not least, the US federal government has commissioned (and paid for) a national report to the OECD (2013c) highlighting that approximately 36 million adults (16–65) living on US soil possess 'inadequate' literacy, numeracy and/or problem-solving skills. Against this background, the US Department of Education has launched a public engagement process with official meetings held in different states. This process is intended to inform the creation of a National Action Plan on adults' skills.

These are just few empirical observations. Many others could be added. They do not tell us much about PIAAC's effects on public policy, nor the empower-

ment of OECD; however, they do seem to provide empirical clues about directions that adult education scholars with an interest in literacy, adult skills and the working of new tools of governance, might undertake in the months (and years) ahead. We would encourage scholars to engage with such issues, and we would welcome contributions around these and related themes.

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Marcella Milana
John Holford
Peter Jarvis
Richard Waller
Susan Webb