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## Word Counts? Considering National Systems of Accountability and Assessment in Adult Literacy and Numeracy

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**Abstract:** Analysis of three national systems of accountability in ABE gives rise to significant insights for instruction, assessment, and policy in adult education.

In 2006 the authors were asked to contribute to a Canadian edited book on accountability and assessment in adult basic education programs (ABE). Our particular task was to look at national systems and see what lessons could be learned from the existing systems for Canada. The importance attached to national systems of accountability and assessment has increased in the last few years, mostly in reaction to the current emphasis on quality assurance in state services generally. Merrifield (1998) argues that this emphasis on accountability in ABE can be seen as coming from several directions: from the emphasis on accountability in K-12 education on the one hand, and from wider changes in economic, policy, and social thinking on the other. Concrete evidence of performance is ever more widely accepted as the fundamental justification for public funding. For our analysis we selected the US, English and Scottish systems of accountability and assessment in ABE for two reasons. First, they represent a range of approaches to the endeavour, and second, they were systems which we knew through personal experience. We believed this to be an asset for this kind of analysis—otherwise it is easy to get caught up in interpreting policy discourse rather than the way policy plays out in practice. The analysis was driven by four overarching questions applied to all three case studies:

1. What is seen as the primary purpose for literacy and numeracy education for adults?
2. What specific mechanisms are included to implement a national system?
3. What contextual factors influenced their development, implementation and use?
4. What are the intended outcomes and success indicators of the national-level initiative?

A key distinction is “standardization” versus “alignment.” By the first we mean *identical* provision and process in different locations, by the second *consistent* provision and process.

### The United States

The national system for accountability was developed as a requirement of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. WIA placed ABE within a broad range of work related programs, which is a major change for the field. Part of the change was the obligation to develop and implement a performance accountability system to assess states’ effectiveness in providing high quality services. Previous accountability measures focused on making local programs more accountable to their state agencies. For the first time, WIA makes states accountable to the federal agency (i.e., the Department of Education) in a systematic way. The National Reporting System (NRS) was developed in response, as “an outcome-based reporting system for the state administered, federally funded adult education program” (<http://www.nrsweb.org/>). The goal is to have “defendable data to report to Congress” (Condelli, 2000) as a way to respond to lawmakers’ questions regarding “return on investment” in ABE (Merrifield, 1998 p. 14).

There is considerable variation in funding and governance for ABE programs across the US, and the mechanics of service delivery vary enormously, but WIA required the implementation of a standardized accountability system, documented at the program level and reported to the USDoe. Each state agency could decide how to implement the NRS, but every

state and local program was obliged to report learner outcome data using national definitions of educational gain along the dimensions of reading and writing, numeracy, and functional and workplace skills. The six NRS “educational functioning levels” (Division of Adult Education & Literacy, 2001) are defined descriptively, using competencies, and quantitatively, by matching them to score ranges on the most commonly used standardized tests. The six levels and their descriptors were developed to be easy to apply in practice but are not empirically derived.

The NRS has put in place a standardized system for reporting learner outcomes, but it has not done much to encourage specific systematic changes since state agencies (and sometimes programs) were left to their own devices to decide how they would respond. These decisions were driven largely by the capacity of the state level staff responsible for administering federal ABE funds to respond to change, rather than by substantive issues of teaching and learning, adulthood, and literacy (Belzer, in press). In a study of how federal policy influences practice at the classroom and program level, Belzer (2003) found that implementation of the NRS has had a significant impact on program operations and structures, assessment and documentation procedures, and instruction. We consider the US system an example of a pragmatically driven accountability and assessment system that aimed to simply add a new layer of reporting over the existing structures, and in the process (but without specific intentionality) effected practice.

### **England**

The Labour government in the UK was elected on the promise of increased investment in quality education, so the poor English results in the International Adult Literacy Survey were embarrassing. In response, a program known “Skills for Life” (SfL), after the policy document underpinning it, (DfES, 2001) was initiated. The SfL strategy is an attempt at systemic reform and addresses curriculum, assessment, accountability, funding, links to schooling, and many other aspects of ABE and the wider educational system. While SfL policy documents recognize a variety of purposes for literacy, it is generally seen as having a primarily vocational orientation.

Unlike the US case, the purpose of the legislation appears to be enhancing the quality of ABE provision through a policy of far-reaching standardization, while also ensuring that the investment in ABE is aligned with other social policy tools in an attempt to strengthen the economy. There are two central features. The first is the national curriculum, which lays out resources including pre-designed instructional modules and teachers’ notes, activities, and standard achievement levels. Just as there is a clear cut national curriculum for schooling, ABE has a strongly prescriptive program. There are a number of priority groups for ABE, including the unemployed and “prisoners and those supervised in the community, low-skilled employees and other groups at risk of exclusion, such as the homeless, refugees and asylum seekers, drug abusers and traveling people” (Literacy Trust, p.4). The argument is that a good curriculum, well delivered, will reduce the social exclusion of almost any marginalized adult population. The second central feature of SfL is initiation of a number of new institutions designed to carry the policies forward. There has been unprecedented investment in the development of resources and services, and this has produced a flowering of documents and other initiatives.

Accountability permeates the system as a driving principle. The first level of accountability is the new National Tests in Literacy and Numeracy. ABE learners who are not interested in qualifications are offered separately funded programs. Responsibility at program level lies with the Local Education Authority, which holds the money allocated to colleges for ABE. Inspections are coordinated by an arms-length agency called the Adult Learning Inspectorate, which has not been impressed with the results of SfL. It recently stated that “there

has been a depressing lack of improvement and a failure effectively to tackle weaknesses over the past four years. This is despite an extraordinary injection of funds” (ALI, 2005, pp.8-9).

The 2001 SfL policy created one of the world’s biggest, most standardized and aligned systems of adult literacy and numeracy education. It also created one of the most complicated. The local emphasis and cohesion of the system are in tension: it takes enormous political will to resist authoritarian over-centralization while also resisting potential fragmentation of the system.

### **Scotland**

Scotland has a national system for assessment and accountability in adult literacy and numeracy provision that explicitly tries to avoid standardization, aiming instead for consistency and alignment. Scotland has responded to the pressures for national level accountability in ABE philosophically rather than pragmatically. The Scottish approach views literacy as a set of social practices rather than skills (Barton, 1994), and the national ABE community has tried to turn this perspective into a coherent and consistent system. For example, in Scotland “literacy” is always referred to as “literacies,” to underline the multiple natures of the activities and avoid seeing them as a unitary set of skills. This makes for a different kind of national accountability and assessment system, one that we think of as philosophically driven.

The development of a systematic national approach to accountability and assessment was driven by “Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland” (ALNIS) (Scottish Executive, 2001). It is worth noting that there is no suggestion that ABE was going wrong and needed fixing in ALNIS. Rather, it is presented as an opportunity to develop a coordinated approach to literacies. It is a genuine attempt to create a system recognizing the diversity of literacies and of individuals’ roles participating in them, and basing concrete practices of instruction, assessment, and management upon those principles. Despite occasional comments from the field that ALNIS is difficult to put into practice, this strategy seems to have been quite effective. The development of ABE since ALNIS reflects four principles: a lifelong learning approach based on learner needs and available opportunities rather than ascribed deficits; free provision; targeted priority groups; and change grounded in research and learner consultation (Scottish Executive, 2001). In 2005 a curriculum framework based on ALNIS principles was been developed and introduced.

The assessment approaches link adult literacies and numeracies to levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The SCQF assesses the difficulty of tasks rather than their content, and differs from a traditional testing approach. It does not use exams in the initial stages, defining levels by competencies and practices. The system is intended to incorporate real world tasks (such as writing to a housing association to complain about a policy) as contributions to a portfolio. ABE programs in Scotland are not required to use this framework, or to encourage learners to attain the associated credentials. It is offered as an option for learners who want their learning recorded and credentialed.

There are few aspects of the Scottish system that are standardized, and the relatively high degree of alignment is driven by the philosophical and theoretical approach to literacies more than by decreeing what practices must be followed. What matters in Scotland is that learners, many of whom have had poor educational experiences in the past, are given an opportunity to develop their own learning and self-determination by controlling their literacies development.

### **The Purposes of National Systems Initiatives**

There are competing assumptions about the purposes of ABE education. Just as theory drives practice, either explicitly or implicitly, these perspectives suggest distinctive policy

responses. Although the definition of literacy articulated in WIA suggests a relatively humanist and socio-cultural perspective, the initiative seems to share vocational, skills-based assumptions about the purposes of adult literacy development with Sfl. Scotland presents a strong contrast emphasising the concept of multiple literacies in policy documents to which many of the concrete educational practices are aligned. England and the US take a deficit perspective on adults, assuming that poor literacy skills cause social exclusion and dwindling competitiveness in the global market, while Scotland positions them as capable and self-determining.

National systems tend to authorize one perspective over all others and this has implications for a limited or expansive view of what is valued, what is counted, and what will likely get the most attention in practice. An instrumental perspective limits the potential of literacy to play a role in many kinds of personal and societal changes. Yet its very narrowness can provide more focus, more concrete goals, and more systems alignment. Making such choices in a top down manner or through implementation mechanisms discourages serious rethinking of the theoretical concepts underlying ABE practice. Despite significant investments of a range of resources, none of the initiatives really aimed to problematize or reconceptualize the purposes of literacy education. Despite the creation of these new systems, it may be business as usual.

### **Policy Mechanisms**

The three cases demonstrate a range of mechanisms put in place to support national systems developed to improve ABE provision. These include a standardized reporting and accountability system in the US, a national curriculum in England, and a curriculum framework in Scotland. Across these mechanisms there were efforts to make the system more seamless, accountable, standardized, and aligned. The degree of emphasis on these aspects directly affected implementation of policy and the way changes were supported by resources and otherwise.

The idea of standardization and accountability grows out of a market model of education. These efforts towards systemizing practice may provide much needed guidance in defining effective and efficient practice and supply data that informs decision making in rational and useful ways. They may even appear user friendly. However, the model assumes that education is like the technical process of manufacturing and selling goods efficiently rather than a socially mediated, dynamic and variable process with a wide range of positive outcomes.

Standardization seems to assume that one approach can address the needs of diverse learners and adequately capture learning, but raises questions about the ability of the system to be responsive to diversity. Performance accountability systems like the NRS, that are easy to interpret for reporting purposes, often reduce complexity in the interests of efficiency, giving a reductionist view of literacy and learner outcomes. Scotland sought to avoid standardization in its national systems initiative, except in efforts to align definitions of literacy. Yet evaluators of the very open, very learner-centered Scottish system have criticized it because assessment was not serving as an effective way to monitor progress, assess achievement, or track learners' progress through the educational system. The contrast presented in these three cases suggests that systems initiatives aimed at documenting or improving outcomes must weigh costs and opportunities of being more or less prescriptive, urging conformity, and seeking the concrete.

### **Contextual Factors**

The structures underlying the national initiatives make a difference to how they actually play out in practice. One influential structure is the delivery mechanism for services. For example, in all three systems a local authority distributes funds that come from the national

government. Yet, their relationships to the national entity and the local programs vary. In the US state agencies can hold local programs accountable for specific performance standards. Each state agency is separately accountable, yet has the autonomy to determine how local programs will provide outcomes data and be accountable to them. In contrast, England and Scotland provided many resources and supports, but had few mechanisms to require their implementation.

As can be seen in the US case, accountability measures without resources behind them are unlikely to have a big impact on practice, but putting resources in place does not ensure success in meeting a particular goal. No formula says that spending a certain amount and implementing a given set of mechanisms yields a specific number of students attaining a desired outcome. The political culture also affects what policy can set out to achieve. For example, in the US education has always been locally controlled, and the idea of a national curriculum would contradict cultural notions of educational decision making. However, England and Scotland both have national educational and qualifications systems. Therefore, the implementation of a national curriculum framework or even a national curriculum was not new. By virtue of this difference, Scotland and England were able to implement a major degree of alignment and standardization.

The complexity of the policy initiative and the complexity of the underlying theoretical frameworks affect the supports needed to implement them. In the US, no new assessment instruments or curricula were initiated, while England and Scotland started from the assumption that substantial retooling would be necessary to refine or improve practices and outcomes.

### **Intended Outcomes**

Although all three systems clearly want the best possible outcomes for the adults who participate in ABE services, they identify success in different ways, with significant implications for policy design. For example, in Scotland where the main effort was system refinement, evidence of success might be the extent to which it was carried out. Successful outcomes might involve more practitioners adopting the curriculum framework. Given the theoretical underpinnings of the system, student outcomes are not really quantifiable and do not lend themselves to being measured in terms of performance standards. Both the US and England present a contrast to Scotland in establishing numeric performance goals and procedures (in the US) to track progress toward them, and resources to facilitate reaching them (in England).

Regardless of how concrete the goals, the type of performance measure is also an important factor in the systems policy. Although there was some leeway in how to measure progress, performance levels reported to the NRS were generally tied to standardized tests scores (generally reading tests), high school completion, and employment rates. This means that practice there is going to be encouraged to look much like K-12 school and workforce development programs. In England the goal was qualifications meaning practice would again look mostly like school, and success means more people have qualifications. Scotland's system assumes that outcomes should be determined by the learner; they cannot be standardized.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

The implications for adult literacy and numeracy are also germane to the wider field of adult education, especially as the lines between vocational education, literacy, ESL, further education and other sectors becomes more blurred with the promotion of generic lifelong learning approaches. These are very often built around common qualifications frameworks (as are already in place in Scotland, England and Wales, and Australia) which need to be interrogated. Implications include:

1. An aligned system appears to offer advantages to all involved even though it may cost more than a top-down model of standardisation. Alignment often recognises the interdependence system components in a way that standardisation may not, and more importantly, it provides for explicit discussion of philosophy and the creation of local, bottom-up practices.
2. Articulated definitions and ideologies matter a great deal. Apart from anything else, there are pragmatic, instrumental benefits to a clearly stated approach that can be discussed, shared, challenged, and communicated throughout an educational sector.
3. The influence of assessment on pedagogy (we call this the “reachback” effect) is very strong, and must be taken into account. This is true for individual learners and at a systemic level.
4. National systems do not “solve” the issues of assessment at an individual level, but magnify and multiply them. They also do not intrinsically improve practice or increase outcomes. A faulty approach will always be a faulty approach, no matter how much documentation it yields.
5. It is critical to determine what the information gathered by these systems will actually be used for. None of the case study countries had worked out what to do with the information gathered, making it hugely costly—in many ways—with little clear benefit.
6. National systems have a powerful internal logic. Once one major element is accepted—such as the principle that every programme should be the same “quality”—then the rest of the system tends to manifest within that context. It is more to align the multiple elements of the system purposefully and reflectively rather than allow them to evolve without consideration.

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