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From classroom assessment to IALS and PIAAC: Disconnected conceptions about measuring adult literacy

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Abstract: The International Adult Literacy Survey has resulted in a reframing of the meaning of adult literacy and contributed to disconnected conceptions about literacy assessment in Canada and elsewhere. In the emerging IALS framework governments prioritize statistical measures and largely overlook the array of mostly qualitative evidence of learner progress. Programs are challenged to balance assessment methods that are meaningful to learners with policy expectations on raising literacy rates. This paper offers a brief analysis of how adult literacy assessment has been caught up in the IALS discourse that undercuts learner-centered assessment.

Keywords: adult literacy, assessment, IALS, performance measurement

In the mid 1990s Canada participated in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) commissioned International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). Statistics Canada in partnership with the OECD produced detailed reports on the results of IALS, and thus created new knowledge about adult literacy. Literacy came to be represented as a continuum of skills and competencies, a new classification of low literate populations emerged, and statistical measures on economic consequences of low literacy became accepted as fact. This has resulted in a reframing of the meaning of adult literacy with IALS taking centre stage as the dominant discourse (Darville, 1999; Hamilton, 2001; Jackson, 2005).

The OECD has commissioned two other international surveys since IALS, the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) in 2003 and more recently the International Programme for Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). In this paper I apply the term IALS to represent the conceptual framework behind all three surveys. The Statistics Canada report *Measuring Adult Literacy and Life Skills: New Frameworks for Assessment* states that the overall purpose of such international surveys is “to provide empirically grounded interpretations upon which to inform policy decisions” (Murray, Clermont, & Binkley, 2005, p. 91). Several important questions need to be asked about those interpretations and related policy decisions. What exactly are those interpretations presented by IALS that inform Canadian government policies on adult literacy? Secondly, what qualifies as empirical evidence, and what doesn’t? Finally, how do IALS-informed policy decisions reach into and shape adult literacy programming? Although these questions require far greater attention than the scope of this paper allows, I will use them as a backdrop in this brief analysis of how adult literacy assessment has been caught up in the IALS discourse.

The Statistics Canada *Learning Literacy in Canada: Evidence from the International Survey of Reading Skills* report stated that “the portion of working age

Canadians with literacy proficiency below (IALS) Level 3 had not changed since 1994 the year the first comparative survey of adult literacy was undertaken” (Grenier, et al., 2008, pg. 27). Campbell (2007) notes that after the results of IALSS were published the Federal Minister of Human Resources and Social Development in a CBC radio interview on October 5, 2006 stated “we’re not convinced that programs [have] proved themselves with the funding they’ve had so far” (p. 4). At the same time the federal government drastically cut the budget of the National Office of Literacy and Learning sending a chilling message throughout the adult literacy field. This statement suggests that the policy decision to cut funding was based on interpretation of the IALS data, and that literacy programs were then held accountable for failing to move learners up the IALS scale into level three. That is the level defined by IALS as a threshold where adults have sufficient literacy skills required for economic competitiveness in a knowledge economy (Darville, 1999; OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000). But could something else be going on here? Were learners in adult literacy programs really not improving their reading, writing and numeracy skills? Or could part of the problem lie with the tools of measurement?

IALS does not measure learner progress within adult literacy programs it measures literacy rates in populations. The IALS assessment framework follows the scientific methodology tradition, prioritizing direct measures, criterion-referenced and task-based psychometric tests over in-direct measures such as learner self-assessment. Notions about objectivity and scientific truths about literacy underpin empiricist claims of IALS survey results representing the true story of adult literacy (Darville, 1999). Since the early results of the first survey were published there has been an increase of IALS statistical language in policy discourse to define and measure adult literacy (Quigley, Folinsbee, & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2006).

According to Campbell (2007) “little is known about the types of assessment tools and practices that are used within the different (provincial and territorial) jurisdictions” in Canada (p. 207). From the limited research on learner assessment the majority of adult literacy programs use in-house methods and a range of commercial tools mostly for placement and diagnostic purposes (Campbell, 2007). Most of the qualitative research on assessment methods used in programs indicate that participatory approaches are commonly used and that non-academic outcomes such as confidence and social capital are not only seen as valuable, but also as essential measures of progress, particularly at lower levels of performance. This foundational principle reflects a social practices model of literacy.

Most adult literacy programs in Canada activate a social practices model that acknowledges multiple truths and multiple meanings of literacy. Even though social practices is counter to IALS discourse practitioners believe it is essential to support learner progress (Grieve, 2007; Lefebvre, et al, 2006; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). This discrepancy is the crux of the matter: disconnected conceptions on how to measure adult literacy. On the eve of the third iteration of the IALS surveys, PIAAC, which will begin its first round in Canada this year, literacy programs and governments alike should be concerned about the political reaction to the eventual results lest they show, again, no significant improvement of literacy rates.

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