

Forum: PIACC's Impact on ABE Practice and Policy*(Part 2 of 3)*

Neoliberal Capitalism, the Misuse of OECD Statistics, and Everyday Literacy Practices: A Response to Kirsch, Lennon, and Halderman

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I begin my response to Kirsch, Lennon, and Halderman's Forum article by acknowledging the contribution of Kirsch and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to large-scale assessments of adult skills and particularly Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) international surveys. I have worked in the field of adult literacy in Australia for more than 4 decades and I first became aware of the work of the ETS in the late 1980s when its assessment framework and literacy constructs (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986) formed the basis of Australia's first national survey of adult literacy (Wickert, 1989). This survey was very significant in highlighting the role of adult literacy skills in Australian society, and in providing important research data to support the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Australian Government, 1991). In the coming decades, three OECD international skills surveys were administered in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 1997, 2008, 2013). One of these, the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills survey (ALL, see ABS, 2008), had a profound national impact, providing the key statistical rationale for Australia's current National Foundation Skills Strategy for adults (Standing Council for Tertiary Education Skills and Employment [SCOTSE], 2012). Thus, for more than 30 years, these large-scale skills surveys have underpinned Australian national policy on adult literacy, now incorporated within the broader concept of foundation skills.

The impact of OECD large-scale skills surveys extends far beyond Australia. It would be fair to state that through these surveys (e.g. OECD, 1995, 2005, 2013) the OECD has since the 1990s dominated the field of adult literacy in its member states. This includes every aspect of

literacy - how it is conceptualized, measured and assessed, researched, framed in policy documents, and taught in the curriculum. OECD definitions and constructions of literacy comprise taken-for-granted, "common sense" discourses on literacy (Rubenson, 2015, p. 179).

Human Capital and Neoliberal Governance

Having acknowledged the powerful national and international impact of OECD skills surveys, I will now outline some counterarguments aimed at disrupting the dominant perspectives represented by the surveys.

I begin with the somewhat uncontroversial question of why the OECD, a large international organization founded on global *economics*, should focus so extensively on educational development? The answer, of course, is human capital theory, the idea that by improving educational skills, and in particular, literacy skills, there will be an economic payoff in terms of better jobs, increased productivity, competitiveness, and profit. This human capital rationale for improving literacy skills is dominant in OECD's discourses on adult literacy and appears to be assumed in the Kirsch et al. article with references to literacy for economic growth and labor force success. Since the early 1990s and preceding its first major international adult literacy survey (OECD, 1995), the OECD has foregrounded the perceived economic benefits of improved adult literacy skills (OECD, 1992). These skills can be seen, not as goals in themselves, but as means to economic growth (Valiente, 2014).

Less commonly featuring in OECD and other dominant texts on adult literacy is political economy, how the system of capitalism works to maximize economic growth. Increasingly for at least the past four decades this has taken the form of neoliberal capitalism which operates “under the sign of the free market” (Connell, 2013, p. 100). The OECD is recognized as a major promoter of neoliberal capitalism (Rubenson, 2015). In its extensive work in education, this includes competition mechanisms, standardization, core curriculums, corporatization, and accountability regimes (Teodoro, 2020). The OECD’s international adult literacy surveys have been described as “technologies of neoliberal governance” (Atkinson, 2012, p. 81) because they promote market values in which individuals, as units of human capital, are expected to take personal responsibility for their own well-being. Improving one’s literacy skills, based on OECD measures of literacy, equates with assuming neoliberal versions of what it is to be a worthy citizen – individual consumers who are knowledgeable and autonomous (Atkinson, 2019; Walker, 2009).

These observations may appear unremarkable for those who are comfortable with contemporary neoliberal values and who see the promotion of adult literacy skills to be primarily about individuals contributing to the labor market and the economy more generally as producers and consumers of capital. But these dominant perspectives are unlikely to sit well for critical educators who resist neoliberal ideology and its practices and who argue that literacy for the empowerment of individuals and communities goes beyond economics (e.g., Tett & Hamilton, 2019).

The Misuse of OECD Survey Data: Level 3 and the Deficit Crisis Discourse

Literacy skills in Australia’s first national adult literacy survey were presented across different scales (originally prose, document and quantitative), each with a range of proficiency levels (1-5). The survey report stated that literacy standards/levels in society were relative “to social and cultural norms, to time and place, to purpose and intent,” and thus there was “no single measure” or level of literacy required for participating in society (Wickert, 1989,

p. 4). In the second Australian national adult literacy survey (ABS, 1997) based on the OECD’s (1995) international adult literacy survey, different levels of literacy proficiency were viewed as a “continuum” of skills and not in terms of “a basic threshold” determining those who are literate or illiterate (ABS, 1997, p. x). The problem, however, is that Australia’s third national adult literacy survey, based on the OECD’s ALL survey (OECD/Statistics Canada 2005), did just that, it established a threshold Level 3 as the “minimum required” (ABS, 2008, p. 5) for participating in a modern economy (ABS, 2008). While this Level 3 criterion level has been contested (Black & Yasukawa, 2014), the impact of applying it to adult populations has been far-reaching. The news media, for example, reported that “half of Australians are illiterate” (Yasukawa & Black, 2016, p. 27). The ALL findings also provided the rationale for Australia’s National Foundation Skills Strategy for adults (SCOTese, 2012) with claims that the 44% (6 million people) falling below Level 3 had serious implications for Australia’s future productivity. These Level 3 statistics have been cited by major government, industry, and skills organizations, and they have been integral in fueling a deficit crisis discourse on adult literacy skills in Australia.

The literacy crisis discourse promoted by the ALL survey has continued in Australia, despite the implementation of the later OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey (ABS, 2013) which makes no reference to a criterion level of skills for participating in modern economies. For example, a prominent national TV series, *Lost for Words* (SBS, 2021), states many times that more than 43% of Australian adults (7 million people) do not have the literacy skills “needed for everyday life.” The TV program claims to base this on PIAAC data, but it has clearly applied the Level 3 criterion from the ALL survey.

The OECD states that proficiency levels have no normative element and should not be understood as “standards” or “benchmarks” (OECD, 2013). And yet, it seems references to the Level 3 criterion cannot easily be erased. Adding some confusion, the latest Australian government report on adult literacy (House of Representatives, 2022, p. 1) claims that 3 million adults lack the literacy skills needed for “work and life.” This government report applied Level 2 of the PIAAC results as the criterion level, which may lead some to ask just how many adults in Australia are considered not to meet the literacy demands of modern

life: 7 million or 3 million? I have argued that these uses of criterion literacy levels are unjustified and a misuse of OECD survey data (Black, 2024).

The Power to Name and Define Literacy Versus Everyday Literacy Practices

Conceptualizing literacy as a series of proficiency levels effectively identifies those assessed within the lower levels as deficient, not only in literacy, but in their ability to participate in modern society. As Street (2011) states, literacy determines what counts as inequality in society. He draws attention to large global organizations, particularly UNESCO in relation to the Global South, that have the power to name and define literacy and thus determine inequalities in societies. In the case of the Global North, this power is exerted by the OECD.


UNESCO and the OECD have similar understandings of literacy as a “single uniform thing” (Street, 2011, p. 580), a set of skills usually acquired and developed in early schooling and seen to lead to a range of benefits in society, including better jobs and socio-economic well-being more generally. This “autonomous” model of literacy (Street, 1984) represents dominant understandings of literacy globally, and it forms the basis for deficit crisis discourses. But there are alternative perspectives on literacy. Street (2011, p.580) argues that ethnographic perspectives on literacy, as represented by social practice approaches, provide an understanding of literacy as practices that are “multiple and culturally varied” that can help to avoid the “one dimensional and culturally narrow” autonomous model of literacy.

Increasingly over the past 40 years researchers have undertaken ethnographic studies of literacy in adult contexts. Early renowned studies included those by Heath (1983) and Street (1984), forerunners of research referred to as the new literacy studies. The focus of these ethnographic studies is the uses of literacy (or literacies) in local contexts, on how individuals and communities manage literacy practices in their everyday lives and the power dynamics that they entail. They stand in contrast to the “single story” of literacy represented by the OECD and its international surveys (Addey, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2015); a dominant, privileged literacy that fails to account

for how local literacies are used in people’s everyday lives (Hamilton, 2001).

In my own research studies of literacy with colleagues over a 40-year career I have adopted an ethnographic approach (mainly semi-structured interviews) to examine how different groups of low socio-economic status adults, I refer to them as working-class, manage literacy practices in their everyday lives (Black, 2024). These groups have included prisoners, unemployed people, workers in local councils and manufacturing companies, adult literacy and vocational education students, and adults experiencing Type 2 diabetes. With each of these adult groups, there was a significant contradiction between the dominant “single story” of literacy that saw them assessed to be deficient in literacy skills, and thus struggling to participate in modern society, and the more complex, “situated” story of how they actually used and managed literacy practices in their everyday lives. Often, indeed predominantly for many in these groups, everyday literacy practices were managed with relative ease, and with little individual sense of being deficient. In large part, this was due to the important role played by others in social networks, long recognized as a source of support (Fingeret, 1983), but rarely acknowledged in “single story” literacy studies. In workplaces, for example, workers collaborated in teams, and lacking literacy in a normative sense (through standardized testing) was a non-issue if appropriate organizational structures, including teamwork, were in place. In the case of another group, adults experiencing Type 2 diabetes, many were found to successfully manage everyday health literacy practices through support provided by family, friends, and informal networks. Literacy, in effect, could be seen, not as an individual attribute that people either possessed or lacked, but “distributed” as shared knowledge and expertise within the social networks of the patients (Papen, 2009, p. 27).

I concluded from my studies that the dominant and powerful autonomous model of literacy promoted by the OECD serves the purpose of identifying those who are worthy in society, based on contemporary neoliberal values, and those who are not. Following Stuckey (1991), I would argue that this autonomous model of literacy oppresses working-class people; a symbolic violence imposed in the interests of dominant groups representing neoliberal capital. The issue for me is social justice. Poorer, working-class individuals and groups are deemed by



governments and dominant groups to be unworthy and targeted with special policies and programs because they do not meet the standards of a literacy that is proxy for being a good neoliberal citizen. Lack of this literacy means they are often blamed for socio-economic conditions (low

productivity, unemployment, etc.) that are not of their making. And yet, at the local level, a great many of these individuals and groups successfully and unproblematically manage literacy practices in their everyday lives, albeit at times with support from others in their social networks.

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