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Publications

International literacy assessments

Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

OECD. (2012). Literacy, Numeracy, and Problem-Solving in Technology-Rich Environments: Framework for the OECD Survey of Adult Skills. OECD Publishing. Retrieved May 14, 2013, from http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264128859-en

> This report describes the design features of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), and its links to previous OECD adult literacy surveys: the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, 1994-1998) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL, 2004-2006). It summarizes the conceptual frameworks for the three domains assessed in PIAAC: literacy and reading, numeracy and problem-solving in technology rich environments. The literacy framework differs from that in previous international literacy surveys (IALS and ALL), in including use of electronic texts. Numeracy is identified as both a "competence" and as behaviour, and four facets of "numerate behaviour" are identified to guide the development of assessment tasks. "Problem solving in technology-rich environments" (PS-TRE) is described as involving the use of "digital technology, communication tools and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others and perform practical tasks"; it includes three core dimensions: 1) The task or problem; 2) The technologies through which the problem-solving takes place; and 3) The cognitive processes by which someone problem-solves using the technology.

Keywords: International literacy assessments, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

The Limits of Literacy Levels

St. Clair, R. (2012). The limits of levels: Understanding the International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS). *International Review of Education*. Volume 58, Issue 6, pp 759-776

This article discusses the background and design of the "IALS family of surveys". The author argues that while these surveys have value because they measure a particular type of literacy abilities strongly linked to economic outcomes such as income and are good at showing the links between this type of literacy and factors such as age, gender, education and occupation, they also have limitations and should not be used to make sweeping claims about the distribution of human capital across a society, or to make comparisons between countries or over time. Yet all these things have been done; for example, some provinces in Canada have set literacy goals based on improving IALS scores. The article traces the development of the survey instruments from concepts and measurement approaches created in the United States in the 1980's derived from Item Response Theory (IRT). The author explains that In this model, the "literacy" measured is an invisible trait whose distribution across the population can be estimated based on the answers people give on written tests. Item Response Theory (IRT) posits that if a person can answer a given question correctly they are likely to be able answer similar questions correctly. This only works if the ability to perform various tasks is distributed across the population along a "normal curve". The author argues that given this assumption, it is not surprising that these surveys find that roughly half the population scores below Level Three. He also notes that the literacy ability measured by the IALS surveys is limited: writing is not directly assessed, a limited range of "functional" texts is used, and other studies suggest that the circumstances in which the test is taken influences results. St. Clair argues that while there is potential to build on the strengths of the IALS surveys, it has gone unrealized because of the persistent use of results to make misleading claims.

Keywords: International literacy assessments, Debates, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

Social Innovation and Finance

Canadian Government Highlights Notable Social Finance Proposals

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. (2013). *Harnessing the Power of Social Finance: Canadians respond to the National Call for Concepts for Social Finance*
http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/consultations/social_finance/report/index.shtml#h2

The Government of Canada is promoting the concept of "social finance" as a means to better deal with intractable social problems by using "new capital and new ideas". Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) put out a "Call for Concepts for Social Finance from November 8, 2012 through January 31, 2013, inviting Canadians to propose projects. Proposals needed to describe the social problem being addressed, the population targeted, elements of the project, means of finance, evidence supporting the proposed approach and how outcomes would be measured. HRSDC received 154 submissions. This report profiles fifteen

"particularly compelling" concepts to illustrate the range of social issues addressed by submissions and to highlight the range of possible social finance tools and structures. The report notes that more than half of the respondents were based on Ontario, with another 20% in British Columbia. It also describes current social finance initiatives in Canada and in other countries.

Keywords: Canada, Social Finance, Social innovation

Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills (WLES)

Work-Life-Study Balance Challenging for Australian Vocational Educational Training Students

Morris, Michelle. (2013). 'Trying to Keep Up': The experience of combining full-time VET with work. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning 53* (1): 44-67.

> This article focuses on the struggle faced by Australian vocational education and training (VET) students to combine the demands of study and work, based on a study that looked at the intersecting work life and study commitments of hospitality students at a South Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) campus. The research design included interviews and a survey modeled on the Australian Work and Life Index (AWLI) which collected demographic details and used a five-item scale to measure work-life-study interaction. The survey was completed by 164 participants with a response rate of 97%. 66.5% of respondents were employed, although most over age 35 were not. There were only fourteen parents in the survey. Over half the respondents were classed as "low-paid", and women were more likely to be in low-paying jobs. Financial need was the main reason given for working. Work-life interference was found to be a regular feature in the lives of respondents, particularly for those who worked longer hours. This interference was higher for these workers than for the general population as found in a 2010 national survey. However, there was also some evidence of positive effects of work-study overlap, particularly when people were able to reinforce what they were learning in school at work.

Keywords: Australia, Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills (WLES)

Results of Workplace LES Program Evaluation Project Published

Palameta, B., et al. (2013). *Meeting Expectations: Measuring the Impacts of Workplace Essential Skills Training: Executive Summary*. Montreal, QC. The Centre for Literacy. Retrieved May 21, 2013, from http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/MOS_ExecSummary.pdf.

> The *Measures of Success* project, which ran from September 2009 to March 2013 and was managed by The Centre for Literacy, developed and tested an evaluation model to assess longer-term outcomes of workplace literacy and essential skills (LES) education programs. The model was tested at ten work sites in Manitoba and eight in Nova Scotia. The researchers consulted stakeholders and experts and surveyed the literature as they developed the evaluation design. The executive summary describes the logic model used to "estimate" outcomes of workplace LES training. 226 workers participated in the program at the 18 work sites: the number per site ranged from 6 to 20 in Nova Scotia businesses and from 7 to 30 in Manitoba. Participation was reported to be voluntary in 14 of the work sites. The most commonly targeted essential skill was oral communication, followed by thinking skills, computer skills, and "working with others". Training hours averaged 39 in Nova Scotia and 11 in Manitoba. Class sizes varied from 5 to 26. The evaluation found that the programs resulted in significant outcomes including improved confidence in everyday and work-related literacy skills, increased use of everyday literacy skills, strengthened social networks, increased satisfaction with life and work and improvements in several work-performance indicators. Businesses reported improved productivity and interpersonal relations. The researchers also found that positive outcomes extended to groups often thought not to benefit from workplace training: people with low educational attainment, immigrants who speak a language other than English at home, and older workers.

Keywords: Canada, Program evaluation, Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills (WLES)

Technology

Digital Technology Competency Developed in Ontario

Sturm, Matthias. (2011). *What is in a Technology Competency? A recipe for the skill(ed) use of digital tools*. http://alphaplus.ca/en/news/news/372-what-is-in-a-technology-competency-a-recipe-for-the-skilled-use-of-digital-tools.html

> This technical paper describes the results of research and development work undertaken to develop a digital technology competency for the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF), although the competency is meant to be applicable in other contexts as well. Digital literacy is defined as including not just the skills in using a variety of digital media software and devices, but also the ability to critically understand content and applications and to create content with digital technology. Background research was done to support the development of the competency. The essential skills framework developed by Human Resources and Skills

Development Canada was used as a reference. The working group reviewed the literature about technology skills in educational contexts and collected examples of tasks for assessing digital skills. Tasks were also collected through consultations with the field in Ontario. The researchers sorted and organized the tasks and developed a scale of indicators for performance and task complexity.

Keywords: Canada, Essential Skills, Technology

Community Education

UK Study of Community Education Outcomes

Harding, C., Simon, A., Evans, L., Joyce, L., Stockley, R., Peters, M. (2013). *Community Learning Learner Survey Report*. Department for Business, Innovation & Skills *(BIS)*
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/128775/13-691-community-learning-learner-survey-march-2013.pdf

> This report documents the first stage of research to evaluate the impact of reforms of UK community based learning programs. Objectives for the reforms include: focusing public funding and fees on helping disadvantaged people access learning and involving local people and organizations in decision-making. The Department for Business Innovation & Skills *(BIS)* commissioned a social research agency to evaluate the impacts of community learning with particular reference to the reform objectives. The researchers are looking at learners' motivations, how they accessed programs, the extent to which their expectations are been met, their use of digital technology in courses, the likelihood of future participation in learning, and impacts such as greater community participation, development of employability skills and improved overall well-being. The research involves a longitudinal study involving two cohorts of learners. The first cohort consists of learners who completed courses between July 2011 and February 2012. A representative sample of 4,015 learners were given a quantitative telephone survey. Six follow up qualitative workshops stratified around learner types and primary motivations for learning identified in the survey were held. The learners were to be interviewed again in 2013. Since this cohort completed their learning before the new objectives were introduced, this provides baseline data to inform a comparison with subsequent waves to evaluate the impacts of reforms. The biggest single motivation for learners was the desire to improve particular skills or attain knowledge in particular subjects. Although learners were generally satisfied on this score, they also reported largely unintended "soft" outcomes such as an improved sense of personal well-being, improvements in family relationships, and greater confidence in parenting skills. Many of these impacts were particularly strong among learners living in the most deprived areas and from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Keywords: Adult education, Community education, Employability, Impacts of learning, Program evaluation, United Kingdom