



A LAYPERSON'S GUIDE TO PIAAC

Practical PIAAC: What Alberta Practitioners
Need to Know

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Two reports – International and Canada



INTRODUCTION

When I was first approached to make this presentation, I was surprised. I guess I assumed that one would start a session on the results of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies or PIAAC with someone who was a statistician and familiar with the data.

The organizers explained to me that they wanted someone who would be able to give a layperson's introduction to the survey and lead a conversation about why it matters, and what the data can and cannot do for us as literacy practitioners, policymakers, government officials, and the general public.

So, here I am with the intent to be your guide through the survey data, to explain from my perspective why PIAAC matters, and why I believe that the PIAAC data is not enough.

I started off by saying I didn't think I was the best person to do this task because I'm not a statistician. However, I actually do know something about literacy surveys and policy. I have worked in the literacy movement since 1989, and had the benefit of being in the federal government during the time of the development and execution of the first three literacy surveys.

Literacy surveys

- **1989**
 - Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activity (LSUDA) (Canada)
- **1994**
 - International Adult Literacy Survey (first wave)
- **2003**
 - International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) (first wave)
 - known as the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) internationally
- **2011**
 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

There was LSUDA, the Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activity survey in 1989, the first International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994, and the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) in 2003. Because of that experience, I understand some of the reasons the government of Canada was so keen to have these surveys and what they mean from a policy perspective.

Let's start with a bit of history.

When the plans were made for the first international survey in 1994, the stated objective was to bring data to the Department of Finance and the Treasury Board of Canada, the economic portfolios, to convince them that literacy was a vital element for our country's economic success, that it contributes to GDP growth.

The intention of the first IALS was not about developing benchmarks for literacy practice. It was not about measuring individual skills at the micro level. It was about giving our country and the politicians the ammunition needed to encourage them to invest in literacy.

IALS and its successor surveys were incredibly successful in making that economic case. As you may be aware, studies based on the IALS data indicate a direct link between GDP growth and growth in literacy levels. In addition, IALS brought about a focus on the workplace.

This morning I'd like to do three things.



Three objectives

- Provide PIAAC data and an overview
- Why does PIAAC matter?
- Why PIAAC is not enough

First, I'd like to give you some of the PIAAC data and an overview of what it tells us.

Second, I'd like to talk to you about why it's important, why PIAAC matters.

Finally, I'd like to share with you my feelings on why it's not enough

I hope that you walk away today with what I believe is my key message. PIAAC is a necessary tool but it's not sufficient.

1. WHAT IS PIAAC

So let's begin with talking about the PIAAC.

What is PIAAC

- 166,000 adults, randomly selected
- Ages 16 - 65
- 24 countries (so far)
- Shares a common conceptual framework with IALS and IALSS
- Canadian sample = 27,000 (largest in PIAAC)

As mentioned earlier PIAAC is the successor survey to the IALSS survey. The important part about PIAAC and the other surveys is that people are asked to answer questions using materials that would be found in everyday life. This is an attempt to make it an “authentic” experience.

The PIAAC results were released last year and represent surveys that took place in 24 countries. Those surveyed were between the ages of 16 and 65. You can imagine with 24 different countries participating, how challenging it is to develop test items that make sense in each of those countries but which are also able to be comparable across the countries. Not an easy challenge. This means certain choices were made about what to measure, how to measure it.

Definition – literacy

IALS & IALSS	PIAAC
Prose Literacy: The knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts including editorials, news stories, brochures, and instruction manuals.	Literacy: Understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential
Document Literacy: The knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts	

With PIAAC, there are some changes from IALSS. You might recall that in IALSS we distinguished between prose literacy and document literacy. Prose literacy is reading narrative while document literacy is the kind of literacy you often practice at work: scanning, searching for information, reading lists, tables etc. In PIAAC, they combined these into one measure called “reading literacy.” I’m not sure why they did this, and yes, I’ve asked the good folks at Employment and Social Development Canada, but whatever the reason I don’t believe this is helpful in trying to make the case for work-related literacy.

Definition – numeracy

IALS	IALSS	PIAAC
Quantitative Literacy: The knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in print materials, such as balancing a chequebook, figure out a tip, completing an order form or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.	Numeracy: The knowledge and skills required to effectively manage the mathematical demands of diverse situations.	Numeracy: The ability to access, use, interpret, and communicate mathematical information and ideas, in order to engage in and manage mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life.

PIAAC also measures numeracy, which is very similar to the numeracy features of IALSS.

A major change from previous surveys was the fact that the participants responded using computers. In the past, IALSS was a paper and pencil exercise. With PIAAC you could opt out if you didn't feel comfortable using a computer. In Canada 81% of survey participants used a computer. Internationally, the average was 74%.

Here are some samples of reading tasks and numeracy tasks. I won't review these here in any detail but they are in your handouts.

Education and Skills Online

Look at the job search results webpage. Click the box next to a company name to answer the question below.

Which company is looking for an employee to work at night?

Literacy item
Level = 1

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <http://www.worklinks.com>. The page title is "Work Links" with the tagline "Connecting you to the BEST Jobs". On the left, there are filters for "Work Type" (Full Time only, Part Time only, Temporary only, Casual/Vacation only) and "Salary" (a range from \$0 to \$200+ per year | hour). On the right, under "6 jobs found", two jobs are listed: "Office Administrative Assistant" at M.A.S.S. Media and "Client Liaison Officer" at Foss & Bass Engineering Ltd. The browser interface includes navigation buttons (back, forward, home, search) and a status bar at the bottom.

Education and Skills Online

Look at the article about the gender gap. Highlight the sentence in the article that answers the question below.

According to the article, what has the impact of increased educational attainment been over the past 50 years?

Literacy item
Level = 4 (low)

Tackle Gender Gap to Boost Growth

Breaking down barriers to gender equality in education, employment and entrepreneurship would create new sources of economic growth and help make better use of everyone's skills, according to a new report by the OECD, an organization of some 34 countries promoting policies to improve economic and social well being.

Overall, good progress has been made in education. Increased educational attainment is responsible for half of the GDP¹ growth across the OECD over the last 50 years. Every extra year of education of the population leads to an average increase of around 9% in GDP per capita, says the report. More progress will be essential for countries to benefit from the economic contributions women can make and to not waste the years of investment in the education of girls and young women. Ensuring that more girls have access to higher levels of education is also key for developing countries.

Employment rates are 13 percentage points lower for women than for men in OECD countries. As Figure 1 shows, gender differences in employment rates vary considerably in different regions of the world. Women are also much more likely to work part-time. Better and more affordable child care and more flexible work conditions are key to helping women to be in paid work or increase hours and work full time, says the report.

Figure 1: Gender gap in employment rates worldwide, 2010

The bar chart displays the gender gap in employment rates for 2010 across 12 regions. The y-axis represents the percentage gap, ranging from 0% to 60%. The x-axis lists the regions. The bars show an increasing trend from left to right, with the largest gap in the Middle East & North Africa region.

Region	Gender Gap in Employment Rates (%)
Eastern & Middle Africa	~12
OECD countries	~13
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	~14
Southern Africa	~15
Caribbean	~16
East Asia & the Pacific	~17
Western Africa	~18
South America	~25
Central America	~35
Southern Asia	~40
Middle East & North Africa	~52

Look at BOTH the newspaper article, "Q Drum Rolls Its Way to Success" and the email on the WebMail tab. Click on a sentence in the article and a sentence in the email to answer the question below.

The newspaper article and email identify a criticism that is common to the Q Drum and the LifeStraw.

Click on one sentence in each source that describes the criticism made about both devices.

Literacy item
Level = 4

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <http://www.dailypress.com/QDrum.html>. The browser tabs include "Simple Technology", "Daily Press", and "WebMail". The page title is "The Daily Press - Your source for South Africa's News". The main article is titled "Q Drum Rolls Its Way to Success" by Zusana Sukoto. The article text is as follows:

Johannesburg—In 1994, brothers Hans and Piet Hendriks introduced the Q Drum in South Africa as a means to transport water that would be less physically-demanding than traditional methods. The Q Drum is a donut-shaped cylinder made from heavy plastic. It can be filled with water and rolled along the ground from the source of the water back to the user's home using a rope tied around the cylinder. There is no need to lift and carry a large, heavy container.

In one local town, where Q Drums have been used for nearly two years, the residents describe how the invention has changed their daily routine.

"Before we had the Q Drum, my son and I made three trips each day to get enough water for our family. Now, we can get what we need in one trip," a woman says. The Q Drum can hold up to 50 liters of water.

Another resident points out more advantages: "Carrying water in big jugs is very tiring, very painful. After each trip, I used to feel pain in my neck and back. But I don't carry the Q Drum. I roll it to my home."

Over the last two decades, use of the Q Drum has spread from South Africa to other countries, including Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania. But the invention is not without its critics. Says Joseph Ngema, a researcher at the University of Cape Town, "The Q Drum is one solution to the problem of transporting water, but it is not the only solution. To work properly, it requires flat land. Not every town or village is surrounded by flat land. And it is expensive, so most people cannot afford to buy a Q Drum."

Nonetheless, supporters of the Q Drum insist that the invention is an important way in which people's lives and health can be improved.

Look at the shoe sale advertisement. Using the number keys, type your answer to the question below.

How much would you pay during the sale if you purchase the two pairs of shoes shown?

\$

Numeracy item
Level = 3

The screenshot shows an advertisement titled "Running Shoes". The text reads: "SALE! Buy one pair - get the second (of equal or lesser value) for half price!". Below the text are two pairs of running shoes. The first pair is black and white, priced at \$29.50. The second pair is light blue, priced at \$34.20.

Look at the cash flow table for a restaurant. Using the number keys, type your answer to the question below.

What was the mean for the total expenditures over the three months?

€

Numeracy item
Level = 4



The table below shows a three-month summary of income and expenditures for a restaurant in Florence, Italy.

CASH FLOW (In Thousands of Euro)				
	JUL	AUG	SEP	TOTAL
INCOME				
Cash from sales	120.3	40.5	77.2	238.0
Other income	9.2	4.2	6.0	19.4
Totals	129.5	44.7	83.2	257.4
EXPENDITURE				
Materials from suppliers	51.6	27.0	70.4	149.0
Wages and salaries	13.4	15.0	12.6	41.0
Overheads	23.0	11.0	11.0	45.0
Capital expenditure	6.0	8.0	3.0	17.0
Totals	94.0	61.0	97.0	252.0

There are two new sections in PIAAC.

Reading components

- Knowledge of vocabulary (word recognition)
- The ability to evaluate the logic of sentences
- Fluency in reading passages of text

The first is called reading components. This measures the skills of those who fall below level 1. For the first time instead of some of these people falling off the radar screen for being at the very lowest level without us understanding why, PIAAC gave specific reading texts to

this group of people to try to find out what parts of reading matter and predicted reading competency.

I still have concerns about the reading components themselves. Many of the tools were based on what we know about children learning to read. However, any effort to better understand those at these lower levels is helpful.

Currently, we have just a little bit of information about the Canadian results for reading components. We only know that 4% of the Canadian sample was below level 1 as compared to 15% across all the countries. The OECD, or the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which sponsors PIAAC is coming out with more detailed information in the future. I think this information will be important to study, especially for those of you who work with people with very low literacy skills.

The second component that's new in PIAAC is called problem-solving in technology rich environments.

Problem solving

IALSS	PIAAC
<p>Problem solving:</p> <p>Problem solving involves goal-directed thinking and action in situations for which no routine solution procedure is available. The problem solver has a more or less well defined goal, but does not immediately know how to reach it. The incongruence of goals and admissible operators constitutes a problem. The understanding of the problem situation and its systematic transformation, based on planning and reasoning constitute the process of problem solving.</p>	<p>Problem solving in technology-rich environments:</p> <p>Using digital technology, communication tools and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others and perform practical tasks. It focuses on the abilities to solve problems for personal, work and civic purposes by setting up appropriate goals and plans, and accessing and making use of information through computers and computer networks.</p>

This was an attempt to go beyond the notion of computer literacy to have people in work on two skills – problem-solving but using digital technology. One particularly challenging part of the problem solving in technology rich environments element is that it was done completely on a computer so those who chose not to use a computer were not part of the results.

Whenever you're looking at the Canadian data from the problem-solving in technology rich

environments, you always have to recognize that 19% of the Canadian sample did not participate.



The other interesting aspect about problem-solving in technology rich environments is that the tasks are similar to those you would do in an office, such as using email or filing Word documents. Few elements deal with other ways we use technology such as social media. Part of the problem was that the test itself was created many years prior to actually being executed so I think some of the social media and technology uses grew exponentially and the test itself probably was outdated before it had a chance to be used.

The federal government funded the Canadian PIAAC, while the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) provided coordination among the provinces and territories.

Oversamples

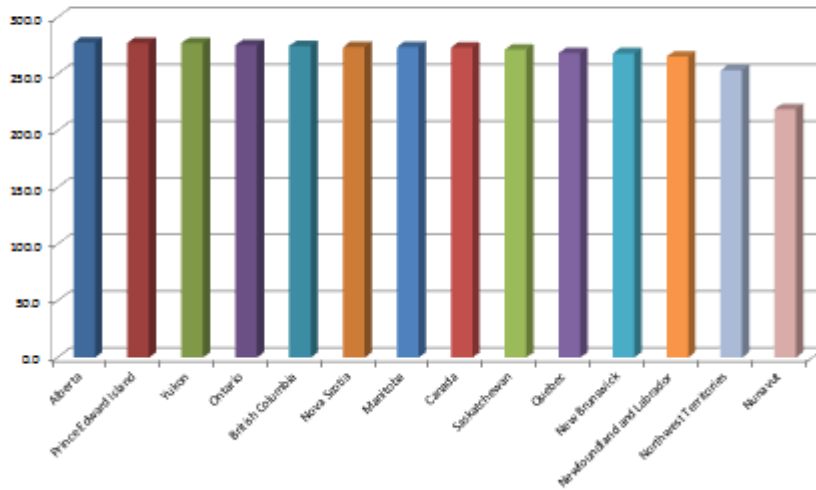
Aboriginal People	Immigrants	Official Language Minorities
British Columbia	British Columbia	Manitoba
Manitoba	Ontario	New Brunswick
Ontario	Quebec	Ontario
Saskatchewan		Quebec
Northwest Territories		
Nunavut		
Yukon		

A number of provinces provided additional funds for what you call “oversamples.” That means, for instance, in Manitoba additional numbers of aboriginal people were included in the sample so that Manitoba could get good data on aboriginal people. The aboriginal population in all of the PIAAC data excludes on reserve aboriginal people. In four provinces, there was an oversample of members of official language minorities while three provinces oversampled immigrants.

I would note that Alberta did not oversample.

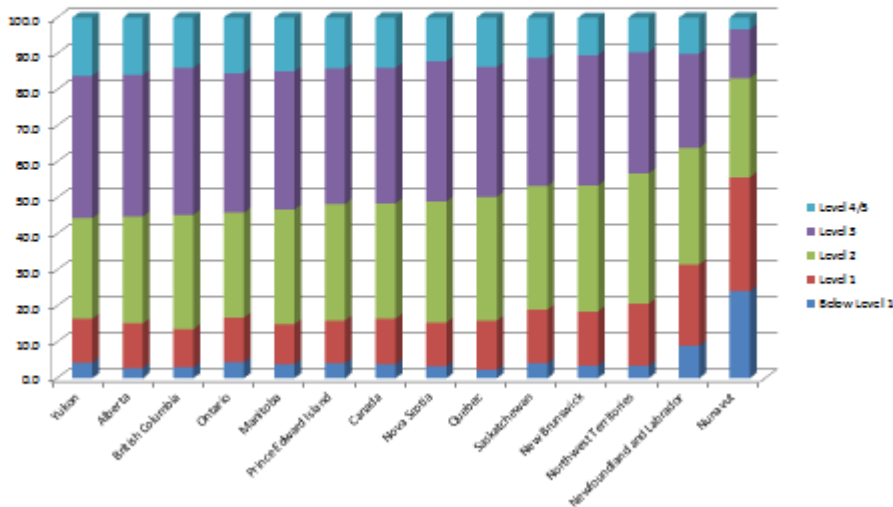
I’d like to now turn to some of the high level results of the survey.

Average literacy scores



As you can see, Alberta has strong average literacy scores. Seven provinces/territories have higher than the Canadian average literacy scores.

Literacy levels by province/territory



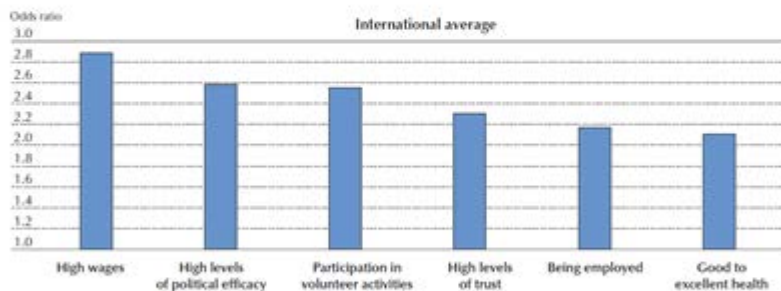
Looking beyond the average at the five levels, you can see that Alberta does very well at the high ends and has 2.8% below level 1 and 12.4% at level 1. Only Nova Scotia has fewer people below level 1.

A similar pattern holds for the numeracy measure and the problem-solving in technology rich environments.

Another exciting element of the international survey was the questions regarding social capital.

Social and economic outcomes

Likelihood of positive social and economic outcomes among highly literate adults
Increased likelihood (odds ratio) of adults scoring at Level 4/5 in literacy reporting high earnings, high levels of trust and political efficacy, good health, participating in volunteer activities and being employed, compared with adults scoring at or below Level 1 in literacy (adjusted)



As I said earlier, IALSS as it's been used during Canada has been an economic conversation about literacy as a value to our economy. PIAAC was different. It asked people about voting habits, voluntarism, and their connection to the community. The Canadian report did not explore these aspects due to a severely limited time frame, but the OECD report provides some interesting information on the aspects of trust, volunteering, political efficacy, and reported health.

As you can see, there is strong relationship between literacy patterns and social and political engagement. Our democratic process relies on people having those information processing skills so that they understand and are able to participate in the political process. This is

beyond the type of skills that are needed for work and everyday life. PIAAC contributes to our understanding of society.

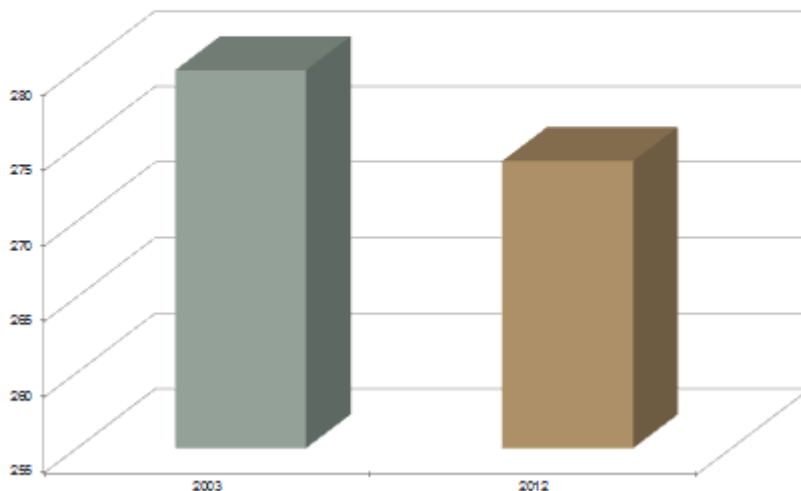
Trust is an important aspect of modern societies, where there is a high degree of trust, people are willing to take risks. PIAAC speaks to the relationship between trust and literacy skills. Those with lower skills reported poor health outcomes. They said they felt like objects, not actors in the political process. They had less trust and were more defensive; “them against the world, rather than with the world.”

Where there are differences between people and their level of skills this decreases trust and can contribute to inequality. Having the strong skills helps people see beyond the 30 second sound bite and enables them to analyze critically what their politicians are telling them. Adult education, strong literacy skills are vital to our country’s capacity to deal with issues in a democratic fashion.

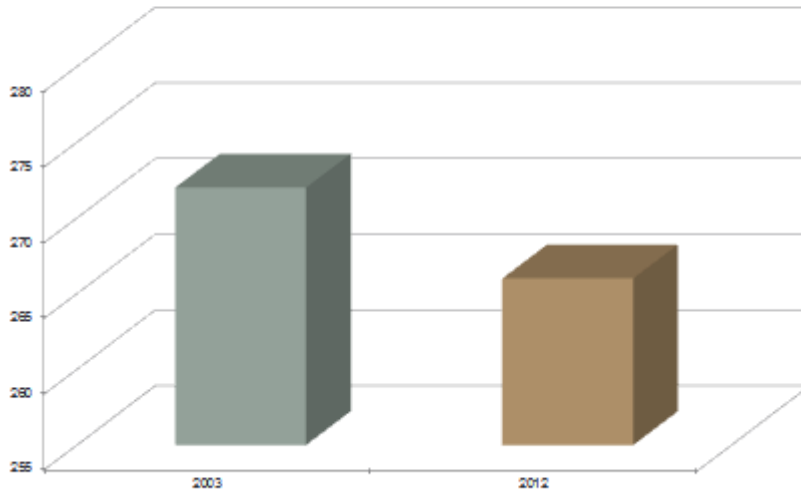
I think this is an area that we need to push to have further explored and better understood. I hope that we can have more detailed information on the Canadian situation.

One of the challenges with the new and improved PIAAC is that it can’t be directly compared to IALSS. This is unfortunate because it is always nice to know how you did compare to previous surveys. Statscan did put together a chart comparing the two surveys, using statistical processes to make the results analogous.

Average literacy scores – 2003 & 2012

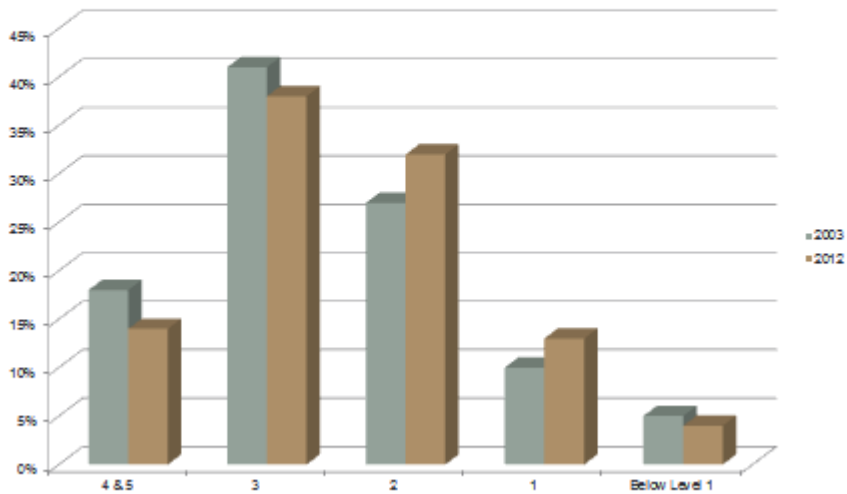


Average numeracy scores – 2003 & 2012

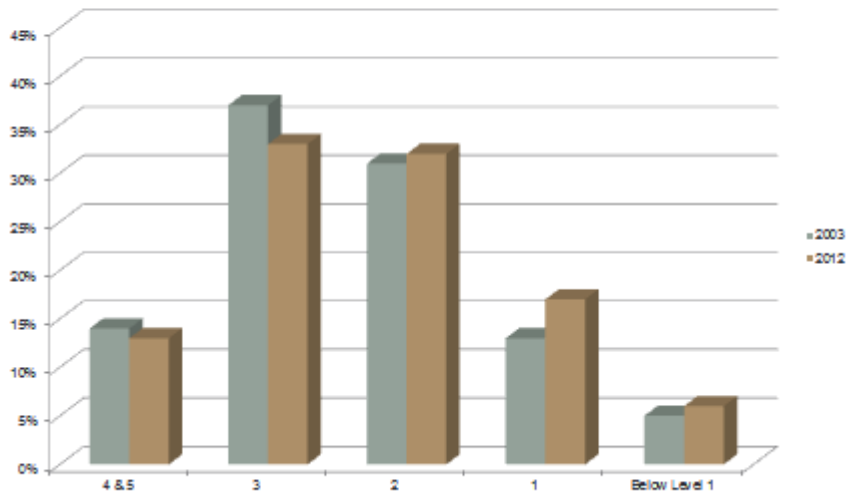


As you can see, if we only look at average scores, it would appear that we have regressed by 6 points in both the literacy and numeracy measures.

Literacy levels – 2003 and 2012



Numeracy levels – 2003 and 2012



Looking at the levels, you can see increases at the lower levels. Why is that? Well it's probably anybody's guess. Lack of dedicated and intensive resources? 13 jurisdictions each doing their own thing? People going into workplaces and not being asked to use the skills they developed during their initial schooling? The Canadian report suggests shifts in the composition of the population as well as the use of skills in an information society may be factors.

Another way to look at the data is to ask: who are those Canadians at the lowest levels?

Who are the Canadians performing at the lowest proficiency levels?

Category	Literacy (Level 1 & below)	Numeracy (Level 1 & below)	PS-TRE (Below level 1)
General population aged 16 to 65	17%	23%	15%
45 to 65 years of age	21%	28%	19%
Less-than-high-school educational attainment	41%	51%	22%
Not in labour force	26%	35%	17%
Service and support occupations	18%	28%	16%
Immigrant	27%	33%	19%
Off-reserve Aboriginal identification	24%	35%	18%
First language is not the same as the language of the test	27%	33%	19%

For those of you how have been around for a while, you probably noticed that I've not mentioned level 3. The discourse since 1994 in Canada has been that level 3 is the gold standard for literacy. We've all gone around saying that everybody has to be at level 3.

It turns out that this was really a Canadian position and one that was not strongly supported by the OECD, which effectively abandoned it a few years ago. Yes, many higher-level jobs do require level 3 but the OECD felt that there was no evidence that across the board everybody should be level 3.

2. Why Does It Matter?

I hope you have a good sense of the PIAAC data. I'd like to talk a little bit about why I think PIAAC matters, why this is an important survey.

First, this kind of data can't be dismissed. It was conducted by a reputable international organization. 24 different countries bought into it. The science behind it is solid.

Proportion at highest proficiency levels

Literacy		Numeracy		P&TRE	
	Level 4 or 5 (%)		Level 4 or 5 (%)		Level 3 (%)
Japan	23	Finland	19	Sweden	9
Finland	22	Japan	19	Finland	8
Netherlands	19	Sweden	19	Japan	8
Australia	17	Flanders (Belgium)	18	Netherlands	7
Sweden	16	Norway	18	Canada	7
Norway	14	Netherlands	17	Germany	7
Canada	14	Denmark	17	Czech Republic	7
England/N. Ireland (UK)	13	Germany	14	Denmark	6
Flanders (Belgium)	13	Austria	14	Australia	6
United States	12	Australia	14	Norway	6
OECD average	12	Slovak Republic	13	OECD average	6
Estonia	12	Canada	13	Flanders (Belgium)	6
Germany	11	OECD average	13	England/N. Ireland (UK)	6
Denmark	10	Czech Republic	12	United States	5
Poland	10	England/N. Ireland (UK)	11	Austria	4
Czech Republic	9	Estonia	11	Estonia	4
Austria	9	United States	9	Poland	4
Ireland	9	Poland	8	Korea	4
Korea	8	France	8	Ireland	3
France	8	Cyprus	8	Slovak Republic	3
Slovak Republic	7	Ireland	8	Cyprus	—
Cyprus	7	Korea	7	France	—
Spain	5	Italy	5	Italy	—
Italy	3	Spain	4	Spain	—

Proportion at lowest proficiency levels

Literacy		Numeracy		P&TRE	
	Level 1 or below (%)		Level 1 or below (%)		Below level 1 (%)
Italy	28	Italy	32	United States	16
Spain	28	Spain	31	England/N. Ireland (UK)	15
France	22	United States	30	Flanders (Belgium)	15
Poland	19	France	28	Canada	15
United States	18	Ireland	25	Germany	14
Germany	18	England/N. Ireland (UK)	24	Denmark	14
Ireland	18	Poland	23	Estonia	14
England/N. Ireland (UK)	17	Canada	23	Sweden	13
Canada	17	Australia	20	Czech Republic	13
Denmark	16	OECD average	19	Ireland	13
OECD average	16	Korea	19	Netherlands	12
Austria	16	Cyprus	19	OECD average	12
Flanders (Belgium)	15	Germany	19	Poland	12
Cyprus	14	Norway	15	Norway	11
Sweden	13	Sweden	15	Finland	11
Estonia	13	Austria	15	Austria	10
Korea	13	Estonia	14	Korea	10
Australia	13	Denmark	14	Australia	9
Norway	13	Flanders (Belgium)	14	Slovak Republic	9
Netherlands	12	Slovak Republic	14	Japan	8
Czech Republic	12	Netherlands	14	Cyprus	—
Slovak Republic	12	Czech Republic	13	France	—
Finland	11	Finland	13	Italy	—
Japan	5	Japan	8	Spain	—

Second, one of the things that PIAAC gives us is an understanding of how Canada fits in the international community. We're the middle of the pack. In an international ranking, we could be doing a lot better. PIAAC gives us a chance to look at those countries that are doing

better than we are and to start a conversation about what we might learn from those countries' experiences.

The skills of young adults

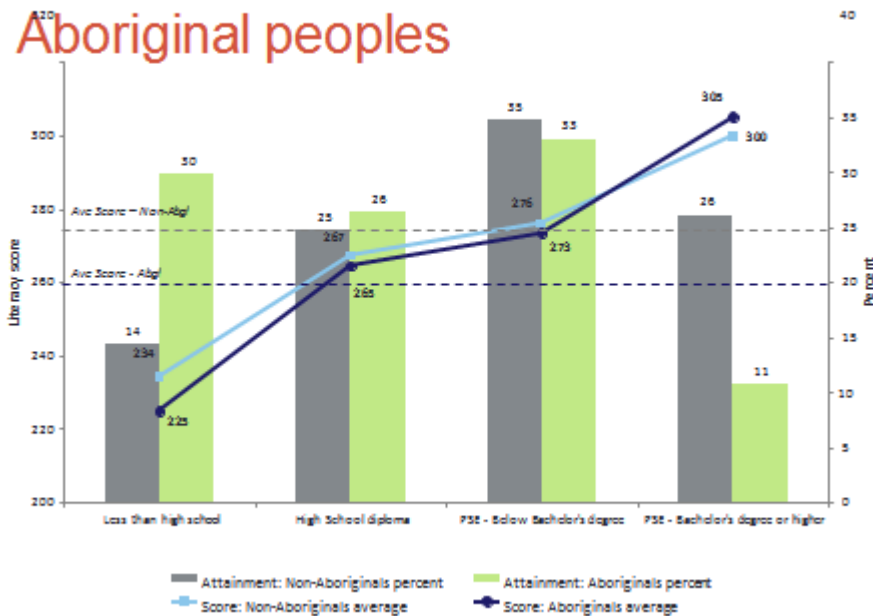
Difference in literacy (points) between young and all adults		Difference in numeracy (points) between young and all adults		Difference in P5-T18 (Level 2 and above, %) between young and all adults	
Korea	20	Korea	18	Korea	33
Poland	15	Spain	9	Estonia	25
France	13	France	9	Flanders (Belgium)	23
Spain	12	Poland	9	Czech Republic	22
Estonia	11	Estonia	5	Finland	20
Netherlands	11	Netherlands	5	Poland	19
Italy	10	Austria	4	Austria	18
Flanders (Belgium)	10	Italy	4	Germany	18
Finland	9	Germany	3	Sweden	18
Germany	9	Canada	3	Netherlands	17
Austria	8	OECD Average	5	OECD Average	17
OECD Average	7	Finland	5	Ireland	15
Czech Republic	7	Flanders (Belgium)	2	Slovak Republic	15
Denmark	5	Australia	2	Canada	14
Ireland	4	Ireland	2	Norway	14
Australia	4	Czech Republic	2	Australia	13
Sweden	4	Slovak Republic	2	Denmark	12
Japan	3	Cyprus	0	Japan	11
Canada	2	Sweden	-1	England/N. Ireland (UK)	8
Slovak Republic	2	United States	-5	United States	6
United States	2	Japan	-5	Cyprus	-
Cyprus	-2	Denmark	-5	France	-
Norway	-5	England/N. Ireland (UK)	-5	Italy	-
England/N. Ireland (UK)	-7	Norway	-7	Spain	-

Third, PIAAC discusses how countries are replacing the skills of those who are leaving the workforce or seniors over 65 with young people entering the workforce. Now we all know the literacy skills decline as we get older so starting with a strong base of literacy skills is almost like an inoculation. Some countries such as Korea have a youth population with skills far stronger than the general population. PIAAC data would indicate that this country has a good chance of sustaining a strong literacy skill level. Canada has youth literacy levels that are similar to the overall population, while the UK youth population has weaker skills than the total population.

A fourth way that PIAAC matters is its strong links to PISA, which is the *Programme for International Student Assessment*, which is given to all 15-year-olds in OECD countries. According to the OECD, we can now look at cohorts of children as they move from formal education into the workforce by examining their PISA results and comparing them to the PIAAC results. For the first time, those who took PISA at age 15 are now part of the cohort of PIAAC. I think this holds a lot of promise in terms of research to understand how those skills are nurtured or not as they moved through the system. I also think that the link to PISA, which is strongly supported by all Ministers of Education across the country, could start to get people in the K-12 system better understanding the link to competencies held by adults.

Moreover, perhaps get to a point where we understand that education does not stop at grade 12 and maybe moving to truly understanding the culture of lifelong learning.

My fifth point is that PIAAC is important to Canada because of the additional information we received about aboriginal people.



The key message I take away is that education and strong literacy skills do matter. When you look at the aboriginal data you see that those with stronger literacy skills have other characteristics comparable to the general Canadian population. I think this is powerful information that can help guide discussions about the future of aboriginal education and about the need to continue to find culturally appropriate and meaningful ways of improving literacy skills among aboriginal people.

PIAAC is important because governments pay attention. As I said earlier, when we did the first IALS it was all about getting the attention of the economic ministers. You can say what you will about the lack of evidence-based decision-making of the current government in Ottawa, but nevertheless having solid statistics to make your case is always useful.

Somehow, we need to find a way to tell our story based on PIAAC. We haven't yet been able to do that. In addition, I think it's quite telling that the federal government did not pay attention to PIAAC in the same way; they didn't buy into it as they bought into IALSS. The media paid almost no attention to PIAAC. Was it because the information was too complex?

Perhaps. Was it because Canada actually didn't show any improvement over the 10 years. I'm not exactly sure, but I do know that without leadership, without a strong message the information contained in PIAAC will not be mined to the same degree as we had with IALS.

It's been almost a year since PIAAC was first released and the thematic reports from Employment and Social Development Canada are months away from release.

Forthcoming Canadian thematic reports

- Early 2015
 - Skills and the Labour Market
 - Skills of Immigrants
- Spring 2015
 - Official Language Minorities
 - Skills of Aboriginal people
- Fall 2015
 - Health and Social Outcomes
- PSE and Skills (TBC)

There's been virtually no press coverage since last October in the Canadian media. I would hate to see the millions of dollars spent on PIAAC wasted by this inattention.

The OECD positions PIAAC as a benchmark and the graphs presented in the international report were "meant to be alarming" in order to stimulate governments into action.

And I would challenge people to find ways to make the PIAAC data live. One of the initiatives I saw coming out of a European lifelong learning initiative was what they called a "citizens' panel." This involved little videos and stories of people to illustrate the accuracy of the PIAAC data and to bring some of the data to life, to help better understand that data. I think that's something we could do here in Canada.

PIAAC is absolutely necessary to better understand literacy skills. It's absolutely necessary in order to convince governments to spend money on adult education. It's absolutely necessary to build that case. But it is not sufficient.

3. Why Is It Not Enough?

I would now like to turn to the question of why PIAAC is not enough, why it is necessary but not sufficient.

Since 2003 when I left the federal government, I've observed how this international information has both helped and hindered the development of policy and practice in this country. We have had an overreliance on IALSS, to the exclusion of other measures that could give meaning to literacy practice. We live in an age of accountability, performance measurement, the adage that whatever can be measured matters. PIAAC and its predecessor surveys define what matters for literacy practice in this country.

I've struggled with trying to find a balance between the quantitative data that comes from these international surveys and my own gut instinct that it's the qualitative data, the stories from the field, that matter as much quantitative data.

No one would argue that good literacy skills are important. But always remember that in PIAAC these are constructs that the test developers created to measure their understanding of the skills. It doesn't mean it's not right, it just means that it's a test. There are other ways of understanding, observing and demonstrating these skills in the classroom and real life.

I like to quote David Mallows from the UK who said at the last Summer Institute on PIAAC and I quote, "PIAAC does not replace knowledge on the ground, don't use it to design intervention, use it to raise issues and messages for advocacy."

PIAAC is a good population measure of literacy skills. However, it was never intended to be measure individual skills.

In this country, we seem to have an extraordinary emphasis on the five levels to the exclusion of alternative ways of measuring progress demonstrating progress. Literacy discourse relies heavily on questions of literacy levels, how many hours will it take to move somebody from one level to another. For instance, here in Alberta and other provinces literacy benchmarks have been aligned to the five levels first developed by IALS. But this doesn't necessarily reflect the full spectrum of literacy practice or the motivations of learners.

This is a very Canadian phenomenon. In many of the European countries, PIAAC is but one source of data that is used at the macro level to design policy interventions. In other countries, there are a variety of different mechanisms to look at the picture of individuals

who have literacy challenges as well as to guide the delivery of literacy practice in the community and in the workplace.

Over the past 10 years, we've seen a shift to have benchmarks that speak almost exclusively of literacy as a work-related practice.

Now I would agree that work is where many of us spend most of our time and that workplace practices can contribute to or inhibit the development of literacy practice. But the political discourse in this country has placed literacy as only a workplace and economic issue. Literacy's role in social cohesion and societal stability is ignored. Other venues for literacy practice and growth, venues such as the community and the family, appear undervalued.

We've set up a dichotomy between literacy as a social good and literacy as an economic good. Here in Canada, with the jurisdictions split between federal and provincial responsibilities, we have the federal government leading the charge on the economic value of literacy with the provinces focusing on literacy as a form of adult or second chance education. Provinces have been dividing responsibility for literacy from responsibility for workplace training, the latter which is now, more often than not, focused on essential skills.

At the national level, government is focused on results, not necessarily educators or practice. It seems more important to show movement from one level to another. For example, we have funders asking that curriculum focus on one essential skill at a time.

IALS was easy to understand – it mimics grade levels. Levels resemble the grade system that certainly policymakers understand. When I was in government I had a director general say to me, and I quote, "IALS is the ultimate report card," – he was planning to use it as a means to determine whether we had been successful.

Having said that, I don't believe that the literacy community has done a good job of understanding or knowing how learners make progress, or if it does, the literacy community doesn't do a very good job explaining how progress is made.

So we have a situation where people push back against the rigid notion of the levels that were developed for IALSS but without providing a viable alternative, or they just accept those levels without question.

One of the challenges of relying on the PIAAC data is that it creates stereotypes.

I heard about an interesting study last June at the Summer Institute that's taking place in Germany. They took a look at the people who were at level 1 and then took a look at those

who were in literacy programs. They found that the profiles were not the same. The overall population of those at the lowest levels does not resemble those in programs. This research is not been released yet, however I think there are some lessons to be learned here. We seem to have a stereotype of people who have low literacy skills. I think that stereotype often involves people who are unemployed, people who have low socioeconomic status. This might contribute to whether people feel comfortable or not coming to literacy programs. It means that we need to ask a question about how to reach those who are at the lower levels but who don't fit the stereotypical profile. I bring this up because it shows how we can take advantage of this data to better understand our practice.

Speaking of stereotypes, we often have an inflated sense of what it means to be literate and what role reading plays in our society. Many people in the literacy community and many people in policy positions in government have strong literacy skills and so believe everybody should have strong literacy skills.

I think we have to be very practical about this. This is why I am really happy that we don't talk about levels any longer but we rather talk about what people need. Just because you have strong literacy skills doesn't mean you always use them. I was reminded of this when somebody asked me, "so how often do you actually read those terms of agreement or terms of consent before clicking 'I agree'" on websites. How many of us read the small print, insurance policies, and documents with small fonts? PIAAC doesn't always speak to how we use the skills in our everyday life.

PIAAC puts the attention on the individual. Yet the environment in which we are being asked to use the skills is just as important as the skills we have. I could have all the skills in the world only to find that the work environment or personal environment do not demand that I use them. In that case, I am not going to value those skills. By the same token, it's imperative that we not create barriers of unclear writing and unnecessarily complex text. It's not just about the individual.

PIAAC and its focus on the individual give short shrift to the challenges faced by adults who are trying to improve their skills. This is not some sort of mechanical process. We need quality programs that are accessible with sufficient funding, teacher training, and resources. Learners need support such as income replacement, childcare, transportation. We need adult friendly programming and institutions. The culture here in Canada values youth education and formal education. This is why adult education sits at the margins. This is why informal education is not valued. We've made adult education something that *those* people.

Brian Street, who writes from the new literacies perspective, had an interesting observation about PIAAC. He said, and I quote, "it is the uses and the meanings of literacy practices in

real social contexts that are crucial, not simply autonomous measurement of levels of tactical skills and literacy. More literacy classes of the formal kind will not, in fact, sort out the inequalities. Rather we need to advocate support for informal learning, in the workplace and beyond, and the various organizations in this field need to come together to highlight this message.”

In my ideal world, there would be a variety of ways of knowing and measuring, and each of these would be valued.

I still don't think we've got the message right around PIAAC. I know I don't. Many people are invested in IALSS and the IALSS levels. Certainly governments are.

The abandonment of level 3 has caused challenges for many across the country.

The message is now fuzzier and more difficult to express in nice sound bites. There has not been a lot of assistance on developing a message. The federal government made no statement about PIAAC on the day of the release other than Statscan posting the report on its website. There was nothing from Mr. Kenney, the minister responsible. Even CMEC, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada who were the cosponsors of the survey, has not been forceful with messaging.

One possible explanation about a lack of a clear message was put forward by Ralf St. Clair, a professor at McGill, who said, and I quote, “PIAAC has produced information that is so fuzzy it's not clear what the key messages are. And that stems I believe from a failure to know what we're asking.”

I believe this is a continuing challenge for the literacy community especially now that we have a funding crisis that has resulted in weakened national and provincial literacy organizations. Where will the leadership come from?

Conclusion

I hope that you now have a sense of the PIAAC data and an overview of what it tells us.

I hope you also walk away from today's session understanding why it's important, why PIAAC matters.

And, I hope I've encouraged you to think critically about why it's not enough.

PIAAC is an opportunity to start a dialogue that's not just about levels. PIAAC holds a wealth of information that needs to be mined, shared, and debated. But we need alternatives. We

need to find ways to express how people learn and make progress in an authentic way. I'm not willing to throw the baby out with the bathwater but I would say that a strong reliance, should I even say exclusive reliance, on PIAAC is not healthy.

PIAAC is necessary but not sufficient.

I'd like to end with a quote from the OECD report:

[t]here is a strong case to be made for maintaining public investment in skills and in using them effectively...[t]he results underline need to move from a reliance on initial education towards fostering lifelong, skills-oriented learning...Governments can do a lot to design more rigorous standards, provide financial incentives, and create a safety net so that all people have access to high-quality education and training.

I hope that today and tomorrow we can engage in a conversation. A conversation about the appropriate place of PIAAC in literacy practice. A conversation about how we can describe adult learning, adult education as it is experienced in actual practice. A conversation that doesn't focus on the individual solely but on the kind of environments that our workplaces, our communities, and our society create to use and foster those skills. The conversation about literacy learning is vital and fundamental to our democratic processes, to our notion of solidarity, and not merely an artifact of our workplaces. I look forward to these conversations.

Thank you for your attention.

The end

PIAAC resources

- OECD – background, international reports, data explorer
<http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/>
- Statistics Canada – Canadian report
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/131008/dq131008b-eng.htm>
- Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC)
<http://www.piaac.ca/471/PIAAC/index.html>
- Centre for Literacy – PIAAC Institutes
<http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/learningevents>

Thank you!

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