

GRALE and PIAAC: (DE)CONSTRUCTING THE WORLD OF ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

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“If custom and law define what is educationally allowable within a nation, the educational systems beyond one’s national boundaries suggest what is educationally possible.”

Arthur Wellesley Foshay (1962), eminent American education researcher

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been very influential in promoting literacy as a policy issue over the last 50 years, initially in poor ‘developing’ countries, but more recently the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also flagged up the issue in the rich ‘developed’ countries. Some governments in these advanced countries were initially reluctant to recognise the problem or commit funds to dealing with adult literacy. They have needed persuasion or evidence from international agencies which have been concerned less with the relationship of literacy with national identity than about establishing universals, such as achieving individual human rights to education in the perspective of UNESCO, or shaping competent workforce in a global market economy in the view of OECD.

Taking adult literacy as the central theme, these two global Think Tanks recently released two international reports: the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, second edition (GRALE II) by UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and the first results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) by the OECD in July and October this year. Although both reports aim at altering the behaviours and actions of governments towards adult learning and education, they present substantive differences in the way of constructing issues and identifying solutions. In fact, GRALE II suggests ‘rethinking literacy’ and PIAAC offers ‘skills outlook’ for the 21st century.

This article presents the origins, objectives and differences of these two reports to help understand them and reflect on their policy implications.

The origins and objectives

Becoming part of the CONFINTEA - a series of International Conference on Adult Education organised by UNESCO every 12 years since it started in Denmark in 1949, the first Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE I) was published by UIL based on 154 national reports from UNESCO member states and five regional synthesis reports in preparation for the sixth CONFINTEA hosted by the government of Brazil in 2009 in Belem. GRALE I aimed to provide an overview of state of the art and trends in adult learning and education globally and was regarded as a reference document, an advocacy tool, and an input to CONFINTEA VI. However, the objective of the

second report has been changed. According to UIL director Arne Carlsen¹, “GRALE II is an attempt to take stock of progress made by the member countries since 2009, following their adoption of the Belem Framework for Action, which called for regular follow-ups and periodical reports on the governments’ commitments to the five areas - policy, governance, financing, participation and quality of adult learning and education”.

Unlike GRALE, PIAAC is a new international survey of adult skills which was designed and conducted between 2008 and 2013 mainly in the OECD member countries. It is also known as the ‘PISA for adults’. By using background questionnaire and tests, PIAAC assesses the proficiency of adults in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. The origin of PIAAC can also be traced back to the pioneering work on the large scale assessment of young people and adults undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s by the US-based organisation called Educational Testing Service (ETS). This organisation has thus been contracted by the OECD to lead a consortium of companies responsible for implementing PIAAC and ensures uniformity and consistency in the design and analysis of data across the countries. The final data set was delivered to the OECD for producing the international report and country notes.

Andreas Schleicher² (2008, pp. 628-629), the chief architect of PIAAC presented its objectives as helping the participating countries to:

- Identify and measure differences between age cohorts and across countries in key competencies;
- Relate measures of these competencies to a range of economic and social outcomes relevant to participating countries, including individual outcomes such as integration in the labour market, employment status and earnings, or participation in further learning and education, and aggregate outcomes such as economic growth, or increasing social equity in the labour market;
- Assess the performance of education and training systems in generating the required competencies, and
- Clarify the policy levers that lead to enhancing competencies through the formal educational system, in the workplace, through incentives addressed at the general population.

Since adult education has become an international policy domain, governments are obviously located within a complex web of ideas, networks of influence and policy frameworks. GRALE and PIAAC are representing social scientific perspectives and are creating a global architecture of education that exerts a heavy influence on how adult education is constructed around the world. By emphasising the objective nature of their knowledge, these international organisations present themselves as neutral and self-effacing as serving their member states rather than exercising their power.

¹ interview with UIL Director Arne Carlsen in November 2013.

² Schleicher, A. (2008), “PIAAC, A new strategy for assessing adult competencies”, *International Review of Education*, DOI 10.1007/s11159-008-9105-0

Methods and approaches

“GRALE II is by nature an international monitoring report, therefore has its core input from 141 national progress reports submitted in 2011-2012 by the Ministry of Education of 139 UNESCO member states. UIL in cooperation with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) designed a reporting template covering the five aforementioned areas to collect quantitative data across sectors ranging from education, agriculture, health, culture, sports, social welfare to finance and economics from governmental and non-governmental agencies”, says Arne Carlsen.

In contrast with GRALE’s data collection through questionnaire for national ministries, PIAAC is based on direct interviews and assessment tests of around 6000 individuals aged between 16 and 65 per participating country. This probability population sample and the collected measurements are the basis to generate estimates at national level. Between springs 2011 and 2012, some 166.000 adults in 22 out of 34 OECD countries, and two partner countries³ participated in the first round of PIAAC. The cross-national nature of the survey is justified on several grounds, such as producing economies of scale across participating countries; providing a comparative perspective for policy makers; displaying greater variation in adults’ situations and results; and allowing monitoring of progress towards international targets, e.g. the ‘Lisbon 2000’ and the current ‘Europe 2020’ strategies in Europe. PIAAC takes a human capital approach and emphasises strongly on comparisons between countries, presupposing a basically competitive global economic context.

The simplest version of international comparisons in the PIAAC key findings has spurred not only governmental attention but also public interest. These first results made headlines on the front pages of tabloids and more serious media alike, for example, The Guardian "England's young people near bottom of global league table for basic skills" (8 October 2013), The Telegraph "OECD: English school leavers 'among least literate and numerate in the developed world'" (8 October 2013), The Japan Times "Japan adults tops in reading, math but slip in tech-related tasks: OECD" (8 October 2013), CNN "America's problem: We're too dumb" (14 October 2013), Reuters "Italy, Spain come bottom of OECD's basic skills class" (18 October 2013), The New York Times "The United States, Falling Behind" (22 October 2013). Perhaps already in 2008, the PIAAC’s chief architect envisioned the excitement of public debates and the anxiety of governments.

From a different standpoint, “GRALE aims to inform member states of the progress in relation to their own commitments to the Belem Framework for Action. There are no plan and comparable global data in GRALE to compare progress between countries and there aren’t any rankings in the levels of achievements. Countries need monitoring frameworks that serve their national policies and contexts. The impact of GRALE is concerned with how the core messages of the Belem Framework find their way into national policy debates and reform processes”, explains Mr Carlsen. Regarding GRALE III, which is planned for 2015 - the year of the UN Millennium Goals, the direc-

³ Cyprus and the Russian Federation

tor envisages that the report will comprise of five core chapters as in GRALE II for monitoring purpose and a special chapter on the wider social benefits of adult learning.

(De)Constructing the world of adult learning and education

Beside the international report, responsible agencies in each participating country work in partnership with the OECD to produce detailed country reports, and thus create new knowledge about adult literacy based on PIAAC data. Similar to the previous skills surveys, PIAAC indicates statistical measures on economic consequences of low literacy (hourly wages, national competitiveness), which become accepted as fact for individuals and countries alike. In other words PIAAC has found a way to reframe and reconstruct the meaning of adult literacy. Its scope and results are becoming significant in framing policy options not only at the national but also in constituting a global policy space in education. PIAAC is designed to repeat in 10-yearly cycle, in order to build up series of data for countries renewing their participation. If it can be managed and financed, this international survey would become dominant in constructing adult education policy discourse.

Taking a closer look at the definition of literacy in the two reports, GRALE defines “literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society” (Grale II, p.21). On the other hand, PIAAC defines “literacy is 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 (PIAAC Literacy Expert Group, 2009, p8). Apart from omitting the ability to ‘create’ text in its definition, PIAAC’s methodology posits that certain skills matter in life (see the three skills mentioned in the preceding section) and they can be measured. The survey does neither incorporate other important skills adults use in everyday life (e.g. creative and collaborative skills) nor measure some essential skills within literacy, such as writing and formatting documents. The omission of such a vital component of literacy in its measurement due to technical and economic reasons of a large scale international survey may somehow undermine the power of PIAAC’s dataset and raise reliability issue in its becoming new constructs of literacy and numeracy of adults in developed countries.

Policy influence: handle with care

Similar to previous OECD surveys, perhaps PIAAC can only give a snapshot of adult skills at national and international level. When reading the PIAAC results, one should also note that the average is not OECD average because 12 OECD countries were not in the PIAAC first round⁴. The OECD claimed that PIAAC links to two previous surveys, International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) implemented over the period 1994-1998 in 16 countries; and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) undertaken in 2003-2006 in 7 countries, and also the PISA tests for the 15-year olds. However, there are a number of factors to bear in mind when comparing IALS and PIAAC. First,

⁴ Many national reports and press releases quoted it as OECD average level. See for example <http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Tiedotteet/2013/10/piaac2013.html?lang=en>

IALS measured literacy using data on three dimensions (prose, document and quantitative literacy) whereas PIAAC measured literacy as a single unit. Second, sample sizes and response rates of IALS and PIAAC are considerably different. Third, there was only paper-based test in IALS while PIAAC used both paper and computer-based test. Finally, there are only 9 test items common to the IALS and PIAAC literacy test, so the link is not very robust.

With regard to PISA, its target population is young people aged 15-16 and enrolled in an education institution, while PIAAC's target population includes the entire population aged 16-65 living in non-institutionalised dwellings and would well include 15-year-olds who were excluded from PISA as they may not have been in school at that time (home schooling, or drop-outs). Moreover, the difference in grading scales of PISA (average of 500) and PIAAC (average of 250) also makes direct comparison very difficult. In similar vein, GRALE I and II cannot be compared due to their different objectives and datasets, but GRALE III is expected to be more comparable with GRALE II.

GRALE II dedicated one chapter to 'enduring quality in adult education' with a very ambiguous concept of quality. Professor Dale of the University of Bristol has commented elsewhere that 'quality concept has the tofu-like nature with no taste of its own; it takes on the taste of whatever flavour it is attached to'. In GRALE II it takes the taste of learning outcomes, and national and regional qualifications frameworks (NQFs, RQFs), which are used as quality tools to 'validate, recognise and accredit' adult skills obtained in non-formal and informal learning. This approach presents a very instrumental view of adult learning and poses the question whether validation and accreditation is the way to certify quality. A Danish expert on validation argues in her recent report "non-formal adult learning is very diverse and difficult to refer to the NQF levels. If included it will reduce diversity and flexibility which are one of the strengths of the field" (Nordentoft, 2011, p35)⁵. There is also a risk of narrowing view on learning by creating standards and controlling measurable learning outcomes in non-formal education. Consequently, non-formal education institutions may face the danger of losing funding to outcomes rather than learning experiences they provide. Paradoxically, such pressure would make them adhere to the regulations and forms of the formal education.

As for PIAAC, other concern would be about the validity of the large scale survey, which was not abated in its publications. PIAAC used random sampling method and set the minimum response rate of 50%.⁶ A standard way of evaluating how well a random sample represents larger population is to calculate the response rate, which shows the percentage of people who provided valid responses. In PIAAC league table, the response rates of the top (or bottom) countries are merely at and below the minimum standard, for example, Japan- 50%, Sweden- 45%, Denmark- 50%, the Netherlands - 51%, and Spain - 48%, Italy - 56%. A low response rate can give rise to sampling bias. Thus accurate estimation with a 50% response should be a concern because the situation of the observed scores explains only 50% of the variance of the true scores for only 1/2 of the popu-

⁵ Nordentoft, A., Jaeger, T., and Gjerdde F. (2001) A survey on the EQF/NQF work in the Nordic and Baltic countries with special focus on non-formal learning.

⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/> accessed in November 2013.

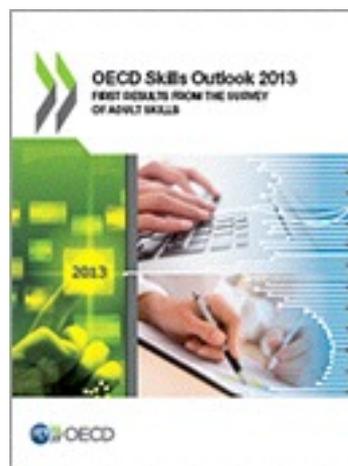
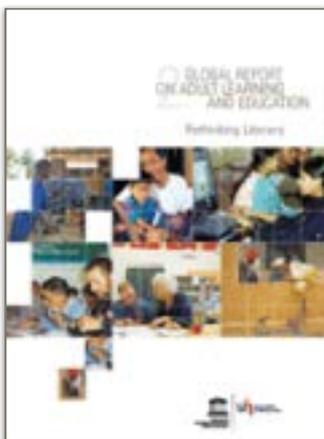
lation in question. Inferences and generalisation made out of this sampling bias should be interpreted with due respect to the limitations. Apart from this, the compounding problems of sampling error, measurement error, and coverage error in such a large scale survey should also be taken into account.

Similarly, GRALE II took information from the national self-reporting at face value without systematic verification⁷. The report covers a large range of countries and issues, it constructs adult's literacy and associated policy domain at a high level of aggregation and generality.

In conclusion, this paper summarises the marked differences in the origins, objectives, and methodology of GRALE and PIAAC. GRALE inherits UNESCO's long-standing humanitarian approach to literacy and frames the report in discursive style. The monitoring report was presented with mainly positive examples and general check lists. In-depth analyses of global literacy problem and its causes seem to be neglected. On the other hand, PIAAC is a relatively new initiative which grew out of human capital approach and inherits the PISA brand. Given the complexity and large scope of the survey, it allows for better comparisons between national populations, since it controls the socio-demographic differences between them (e.g. age cohorts, education attainment, occupational status, wages, cultural background). However, making direct comparisons of one country with another by simply looking at their average results is problematic. It is vital to understand what exactly is being compared.

In order to use these two international reports and datasets for developing literacy programmes or policies, researchers, teachers, practitioners and policy makers need to maintain a healthy scepticism about the way in which findings are interpreted and presented. This exercise requires an understanding of the political context and the ideological debates that surround the reception of results in a particular country, as well as the global education policy discourse.

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⁷ GRALE II page 15