LITERACY AS NUMBERS
Researching the Politics and Practices of International Literacy Assessment

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In this chapter I explicate how aspects of the OECD’s adult literacy assessment regime are put to use to co-ordinate adult literacy learning in Canada. Guided by institutional ethnography, the analysis reveals how the testing technology used by the OECD, along with its operational and support devices, is transposed into the context of adult literacy education and vocational training, carrying the ideological interests of the assessment regime, some of its methodological procedures and associated literacy practices. Methods used to develop the testing technology and its related operational and support devices have been reformulated, and then integrated into curriculum frameworks, programme assessments and even instructional materials. This has been primarily a Canadian project, which began in the early 1990s, and has involved mostly Canadian experts who were and continue to be directly involved in the international assessment initiative.

Transposition is a process of institutionalising and codifying aspects of the OECD assessment regime within adult literacy education policy, pedagogy and teaching and learning practice. It is accomplished when the test’s operational and support devices are incorporated into a national occupational skills development framework. It is also accomplished when the assessment regime’s testing technology is reformulated as spin-off tests for individual and programme use, a facet of the transposition that has recently moved beyond North America, and has been taken up by the European Union.
I use institutional ethnography in this chapter to analyse and trace the devolution of the OECD testing technology into programme policy and curriculum, demonstrating how the technologies of testing are never neutral and objective, but are infused with ideological interests, related practices and procedures. The analysis also reveals the fundamentally discursive nature of large-scale testing projects from conceptualisation to model development through to the construction of test items and scoring systems. The underpinning discursive technologies, practices and decision-making are obscured in reports containing a dizzying array of data displays. These sideline discussion and analysis of the political and pedagogical impacts of the regime.

CANADA’S INVOLVEMENT IN THE ASSESSMENT REGIME

Canada has had a central role in the development and ongoing administration of the international assessment initiative. Canadian assessment experts contributed to the initial development of the assessment, and then Statistics Canada in partnership with the OECD managed the first two international projects (IALS and ALL). The testing technology, comprising a series of test tasks, was developed at Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States in the decade before the IALS. The technology was used in a series of mostly US-based adult literacy testing initiatives during that time. One Canadian testing project, Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA), was completed. The project demonstrated that the testing technology could be lifted out of its American context and, more importantly for international use, the LSUDA demonstrated that the test could be adapted for different languages (see Montigny et al. 1991). Also developed in the project were social and economic implications of test results, which were directed at educational and labour market development policy-makers (see Jones 1993a).

The first two rounds of international testing (IALS and ALL) were carried out in partnership with the OECD and Statistics Canada. The third round (PIAAC) does not involve the same partnership, but Canada and Canadian experts remain highly involved. The country produced the largest sample for the PIAAC, and a key member of the LSUDA initiative and subsequent IALS and ALL surveys led the re-development of the conceptual framework for literacy in PIAAC, which involved merging two domains (i.e. document use and prose) into one (see OECD 2009). In addition, the former manager of the IALS and ALL projects at Statistics Canada continues to be actively involved in a variety of educational and labour-market development projects, and has attained the status of Canada’s literacy expert in the context of federal (and some provincial) literacy projects and policy development. As the assessment regime has privileged and institutionalised a certain form of literacy for large-scale testing (Hamilton 2001), those with in-depth knowledge of the workings of this literacy have become privileged experts, disestablishing other literacy knowledge and expertise.

FROM IMPELLING TO MEDIATING INDIVIDUAL PRODUCTIVITY FOR A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The international assessment initiative is the realisation of a broadening interest in the capacity of education, and more specifically skill development, to contribute to economic growth. The technology carries the OECD ideological interest in developing people’s literacy abilities as an appropriate human resource that will fuel productivity and global competitiveness, and further entrenches and expands this interest, using a highly sophisticated testing procedure (Darville 1999).

Within the OECD, ‘economics has come to colonize the educational agenda’ (Rubenson 2008, 251). What started in the 1960s as a discussion focused on access to educational opportunities that would develop human capital in order to achieve social and economic equality has turned into a narrow focus on adult skill development for employment and national productivity (Darville in press; Rubenson 2008). Supporting the focus on skill development is a hegemonic discourse (Rubenson 2008): the assumption that literacy skills can, on their own and separate from social and economic conditions, serve as an indicator or proxy of the types of labour market skills that lead directly to economic gains. Rather than a concern with the macro influence of human capital, the interest has narrowed substantially to the microeconomics of company productivity and the development of literacy as a human resource to enhance competitiveness (Darville in press). While the OECD engages in a variety of policy initiatives, it is the educational statistics and indicators programme (of which, along with PISA, adult literacy assessments are one key part) that actualises the organisation’s ‘hegemonic influence’ over their education agenda (Rubenson 2008). Drawing on institutional ethnography, further analysis of the OECD skill development discourse reveals that it is the assessments themselves (IALS, ALL and PIAAC) that carry and develop the discourse, a discourse that is also used to mediate policy development and, as will be described, curriculum development and
pedagogy. Assessment results are presented in ranking tables that are used to compare countries, provinces and states and even groups of people in order to instill competitiveness (Darville in press). Further, the testing technology and its rankings act like a quality assurance indicator, judging the potential of national literacy resources to provide an economic return (Jackson and Slade 2008).

[The technology] assesses, labels, ranks, and organizes whole populations according to their value as a resource for production, and thus for capital accumulation on a transnational scale. Having IALS data to certify the ‘employability’ of the population is increasingly like having ISO certification; it means that the nation is ‘open for business’ in the global economy. (Jackson and Slade 2008, 37)

Assessment results can serve as a warning system to alert politicians and policy-makers about the potential deficiencies of the literacy resource, and impel them to address the concern. Population testing is used as a policy motivator to incite responses that address the overarching policy interest – ensuring the development of highly productive workers for a competitive global economy. Governments respond with policy initiatives that are formulated using test results and their international rankings. While some countries have responded by promoting literacy development and mobilising literacy education reforms and large-scale initiatives (e.g. Skills for Life; see Department for Education and Skills 2001), only Canada has fully exploited the regulation of literacy development – that is, pedagogy and programme learning mandates – using the international assessment. OECD’s role in Canada shifts from merely stimulating and influencing policy (see Rubenson and Walker 2011) to a more directive control of policy and instructional intervention.

Although Canada’s interpretation and use of the OECD literacy assessment may be unique (see Hayes 2013 for an overview), there are indications that the OECD is using the assessment as more than a policy stimulus, and is interested in the way that the assessment can be influential in more direct ways to regulate literacy learning. Statements in the recent PIAAC report position information processing, the type of literacy developed for testing, as a valuable and learnable skill in its own right.

The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) assesses the proficiency of adults in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments. ‘These are considered to be ‘key information-processing skills’ in that they are: necessary for fully integrating and participating in the labour market, education and training, and social and civic life; highly transferable, in that they are relevant to many social contexts and work situations; and ‘learnable’ and, therefore, subject to the influence of policy. (OECD 2013, 56)

Clearly demonstrating the OECD’s instructional and pedagogical interests is the development and promotion of a spin-off test: Education and Skills Online (as of September 2014 a demonstration version can be accessed at www.piaacgateway.com) in partnership with the European Union. A Canadian spin-off test, as will be described in the next section, has become an integral device in the transposition process, providing a way for the testing technology and information-processing literacy to reach individuals and programmes. Arguably, OECD interests have narrowed even further, beyond the microeconomics of firm productivity to the level of individual productivity, and measuring and monitoring the potential of each person to be competitive in a global knowledge economy.

ANALYSING THE PROCESS OF TRANSPORISON AS TEXTUAL CO-ORDINATION

The analysis in this chapter is drawn from a larger ethnographic study completed for my PhD (see Pinsent-Johnson 2014). A key aspect of the ethnographic approach used in an IE project is a textual analysis or, in IE terms, a mapping of the institutional arrangement (Smith 2005). Within IE, an institution is organised around a particular function such as education, health care, social services and so on. An institutional arrangement is composed of various forms and modes of co-ordination that could involve professional bodies, unions, policy-makers, educators, consultants and many others. Institutional co-ordination of day-to-day activity and decision-making can be traced and analysed by focusing on particular institutional texts. I examined curriculum documents, accountability protocols, learning materials and learner assessments in order to reveal how certain aspects of the OECD assessment regime have been lifted out of their testing context and carried into educational policy-making and curriculum development. To map the institutional arrangement, I first demarcate and describe four textual devices and technologies of analytical interest: (1) the test tasks and their model of information processing; (2) spin-off tests; (3) level descriptions; and (4) level implications. I then trace how these texts are transposed into the context of adult literacy education as part of a federal skill development project: the Essential Skills. Although adaptations are made as the texts from the OECD assessment are incorporated into the Essential Skills framework, they carry many of the same operational principles and procedures (Smith 2005), shaping how literacy is conceptualised, taught and valued. They also carry the ideological interests of the OECD to ensure individual productivity potential and competitiveness.
Within IE, texts are replicable representations of discourse, and discourse ‘is understood as text-coordinated relations among actual people’ (Smith 2008). As the material and replicable organiser of discourse,

[(t]he term text is understood inclusively to locate any material thing carrying words, numbers or images that can be and is replicated so that the consciousness of anyone looking, reading, hearing, is coordinated (though not determined) by the same words, numbers, images, or sounds as any other (Smith 2007, 10).

Such textual co-ordination introduces discursive concepts and practices into the present moment for the reader, organising consciousness, and then becoming hooked into the reader’s ongoing courses of activity. In this way, texts are a ‘two-sided-act’ (Smith 2005).

Their materiality means they can be traced and explicated within various contexts using ethnographic methods, including their context of development and movement into different contexts that are part of people’s day-to-day activities. In this way, IE contributes to understandings of the global in the local (Hamilton 2012). The usual aim of an IE analysis is to map institutional arrangements that are held in place by various texts, and to describe people’s organised and often reorganized activities within these arrangements. The textual standardisations of the institution ‘provide categories and concepts’ that articulate ‘local courses of action to the institutional function’ (Smith 2005, 225). People’s textually mediated activities then become ‘recognizable and accountable’ to the institution and not to their actual experiences in a textually co-ordinated process of ruling relations (Smith 2005).

Stepping away from the institutional function in order to recognise its operation can be challenging: textual standardisation and organisational systems are ubiquitous, sophisticated and interconnected. Further, in order to demonstrate professional competency, one must engage actively with the institutionalised conceptual processes and practices. It can be challenging to see and do otherwise. IE refers to this phenomenon as institutional capture. However, moments of disjunction occur, perhaps when a new policy or process is introduced. Such disjunctures between institutional policies and practices and everyday experience provide openings that can be used to further examine the relational impacts of institutional co-ordination, ideally leading to changes that better align accountability and regulatory processes with actual experience.

Agency is also a two-sided concept in IE, and is seen as a property of both texts and people. ‘Texts establish a ‘textually sanctioned’ agency that ‘produces a power that is generated by the concerting and mobilization of people’s work’ (Smith 2005, 183). The texts introduce new courses of thought and action, which may be taken up in various ways, from repudiation to enthusiastic adoption. At the same time, people engage in a ‘text-reader conversation’ (104), in which they actively and consciously respond to the text. They are simultaneously both agent and subject. Asserting human agency opens up analysis to understanding how people, positioned throughout an institutional arrangement, contribute to its active co-ordination, and subsequently, how different decisions, ones that are more responsive to actual experiences and local practices, can be made. IE offers nuanced understandings of trajectories of power and assembled networks by explicating how people actively participate in the process and become hooked into these arrangements. Although IE is not as concerned with the properties of texts on their own, compared with the approach of social semiotics, analytical concepts that are used to examine the workings of textual properties could be highly informative in an examination of textual mediation and the development of various textual devices and technologies.

In addition to the fundamental concept of textual co-ordination, I drew on the following methodological concepts to support my analysis: (1) experience and work; (2) regulatory frames; and (3) intertextuality and intertextual hierarchies.

**EXPERIENCE AND WORK**

People’s *experience* of the social, and their day-to-day *work* in an institutional arrangement of concern (that is not yet fully recognisable), is the starting point for analysis. One’s experience is ‘a place to begin, not a topic, nor a subject-matter, nor an object’ (Smith 1993, 183). As an adult educator and programme co-ordinator I had to work with a series of curricular changes, including individualised learning plans and goal-setting similar to those used in England (see Hamilton 2009), designed to track and document learner progress and literacy learning outcomes. The most recent programme reform effort was markedly different, as it incorporated the levels used for OECD international assessment and a new form of testing based on the information-processing model. This was my moment of disjunction: frustration due to the introduction of yet another curriculum and accountability reform, and confusion as I attempted to figure out how and why an international assessment was supposed to support day-to-day teaching and learning.
The concept of regulatory frames informed the analysis of the development of the test tasks used in the OECD assessment initiative. Regulatory frames are ‘discursive procedures that organize how something is to be interpreted’ (Smith 2005, 227). The frames provide ‘instructions for interpreting the texts’ and ‘orient the production of a text’ (ibid.) and thus help to organise day-to-day work and decision-making and to ‘transmit “organization” invented in one site of ruling to multiple sites’ (Smith 1993, 93). As explained briefly in the next section, the production of OECD assessments is guided by a complex analytical framework that is, in turn, informed by Item Response Theory (IRT). Analysis of the production of the test tasks and their regulating principles and processes reveals the limitations of the ability of the test tasks to provide pedagogically useful information.

**Intertextuality**

The basic operation of the test tasks and their regulating properties along with other devices from the OECD assessment, such as the levelling system and descriptions of those levels, are then incorporated into a curriculum framework. This is an example of intertextuality, whereby two or more textual technologies or devices from distinct systems are integrated. The result is a hybrid of organising texts that operate in interdependent and hierarchical ways (Smith 2005), in which texts from one system are used to regulate the integration and subsequent reconfiguration of texts from another system. The international assessment’s proficiency levels and descriptions of those levels, as will be described in greater detail, were reconfigured within the context of competency-based curriculum development. In another intertextual integration, the proficiency levels and spin-off assessments are reconfigured to fit into a performance management framework that is used to allocate literacy programme funding. Both the curriculum framework development process and the performance management framework have their own unique developmental trajectories, which will not be taken up in this chapter, and both are then put to use to regulate the integration of the OECD assessment devices in an intertextual hierarchy. The intertextual amalgamation of three distinct sets of devices indicates the complexity involved in unravelling the operation of new policies and processes that arrive in local programmes in their intact textual forms, seemingly from nowhere.

To measure literacy across languages and cultures, the OECD used an existing testing technology that was developed at Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the 1980s (see also Guadalupe, this volume). The focus of test development is on producing test tasks that perform in predictable ways using complex psychometric procedures and modelling in a process called scaling (see Kirsch 2001) in order to ‘provide reliable and valid information about the distribution of skills in populations and subgroups within and among various populations’ (Kirsch 2003, 182). The test tasks are designed to provide information about the use of a specific set of skills that were assembled in a working model for the testing project, referred to as information-processing skills. This model of information processing (not to be confused with the same term used in the field of cognitive studies) is the basis for identifying, developing and measuring the elements that make each test task more difficult for the test-taker. In the model an individual first identifies a goal for reading the text (i.e. the testing situation) then identifies ‘given’ and ‘requested’ information (this would be based on the stimulus provided and the test question posed), searches the ‘target document’ to ‘match given information’, then ‘extracts’ details from the text to ‘complete the requested information frame’, and finally verifies the information. At any stage, the test-taker or reader may have to ‘cycle’ back to a previous stage in order to complete the task (Kirsch 2003; Guthrie and Mosenthal 1987). The extent to which a person would actually call upon such highly regulated processes outside the testing situation in order to respond to literacy demands is not known. Based on the information-processing model, scoring protocols using five variables of difficulty were developed. The process followed to produce the scoring protocols is referred to as an ‘extensive grammar’ by test developers (Kirsch et al. 2003), and it is the ‘extensive grammar’ that regulates the complex psychometric modelling processes used to scale the items, not the other way around.

The information-processing model was not derived from elements that could make learning to read difficult, such as vocabulary development, fluency, knowledge of grammatical conventions and comprehension. Rather, it was based on elements that cause difficulty amongst those who have already acquired reading abilities. Furthermore, the model of difficulty is limited to understanding what makes test-taking itself difficult, a very specific kind of reading ability, as it was derived from an analysis of errors made on previous literacy tests (Kirsch and Guthrie 1980). It was also designed to operate
in a distinct way compared with previous functional literacy tests and the reading comprehension model used in those tests and school-based testing and curricula (Guthrie and Mosenthal 1987). Such a unique methodological model may work for population testing (its intended use) but becomes highly problematic when lifted out of its intended context and into educational contexts in order to provide information about the individual development of literacy abilities. The transposition of the information-processing model and accompanying methodological principles into educational policy and curriculum is what is currently being attempted in the Canadian context but it has not yet been fully realised or examined until now. Supporting the transposition process in Canada is a reformulation of the testing technology for programme and individual use through the development of spin-off tests and level descriptors, which I describe below.

### SPIN-OFF TESTS

To date, three standardised spin-off tests have been developed: (1) the US-based Prose, Document, Quantitative (PDQ) (accessible online at www.ets.org); (2) a modified Canadian version, the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) (accessible online at www.towes.com); and, as mentioned previously, (3) Education and Skills Online (accessible online at www.piaacgateway.com). In addition, two provinces (Ontario and Alberta) have developed non-standardised tests for programme and individual use. Only Ontario has mandated their use and tied test results to funding (Hayes 2013). Test developers and psychometricians involved in the international assessments contributed to the development of at least two of the three standardised spin-offs (development information is not available for PIAAC). While the spin-offs don’t adhere to some of the scoring and modelling complexities used in the international assessments, the test tasks and accompanying test questions adhere to the regulatory principles of the assessment framework, including the information-processing model and overarching IRT principles. In other words, the spin-off tests operate in a very similar manner as the international test. They also carry the OECD’s interests in mediating individual productivity and competitiveness directly into educational programmes. According to promotional information for Education and Skills Online, test results will allow individuals to ‘benchmark themselves with adults of similar background in their country or internationally’ (OECD and the European Commission 2013, 1). Further, they can be used by education and training organisations or local governments to ‘assess the skills of a particular population with the goal of providing training or for research purposes’ (ibid.). In addition to new test-taking practices and understandings of texts, the conceptual practices of the OECD assessment regime – managing and monitoring the potential of each person to be competitive in a global knowledge economy – are carried into programmes. Not considered in this scheme are the striking contradictions between the technological design of the test – its disconnection from language and culture, and inability to measure individual skill acquisition – and OECD interests in directly shaping education policy and practice.

### LEVEL DESCRIPTIONS

To explain the unique operation of the test tasks and provide some sense of the abilities used by test-takers to complete test questions, a set of level descriptions was created by test developers. The level descriptions describe how the test tasks become more complex and difficult for the test-taker across five levels of difficulty and three skill domains (i.e. prose, document and quantitative). They first appeared in the US-based National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), a precursor to the IALS, and have been reproduced in reports related to the IALS and ALL. PIAAC reports contain a slightly modified version to reflect the changes made to the reorganisation of the skill domains and introduce a new domain: problem-solving in technology-rich environments.

An example of the level descriptions for Level 1 appear in Table 1. These descriptive statements have become a fundamental textual co-ordinator in curriculum development and pedagogical work, as regulating principles and processes of competency-based curriculum development come into play. The statements are composed of precise descriptions of observable activity (the premise of a competency-based approach) across three domains and over five hierarchical levels. The organisational structure is immediately recognisable to educators and curriculum developers. It is used in curriculum frameworks and rubrics, and is ubiquitous in education. Statements describing test-task difficulty are reformulated as indicators of literacy development, operating in the same way as sets of learning objectives in a competency-based approach. For example, the statement from the prose domain at Level 1 (i.e. ‘Most of the tasks at this level require the reader to read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information’) is modified in the context of curriculum development to become a learning objective: ‘Read short texts to locate a single
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LEVEL IMPLICATIONS

The final device of analytical interest is a set of brief statements that correlate each of the five levels with assumed socioeconomic implications for individuals. The most recognisable and influential statement is a declaration that Level 3 is a ‘suitable minimum’ level of proficiency for all adults. The device was created by test managers at Statistics Canada for the IALS and ALL in order to mobilise education policy-makers. The discursive shift leads readers and curriculum developers to assume that the test tasks produce measures of individual abilities, rather than describe the variables that make the test tasks difficult.

Table 1: Level descriptions for Level 1 (Excerpt from Kirsch et al. 2001, 340, 343, 346)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prose literacy</th>
<th>Document literacy</th>
<th>Quantitative literacy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 (0–225)</td>
<td>Most of the tasks in this level require the reader to read relatively short text to locate a single piece of information which is identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive. If plausible but incorrect information is present in the text, it tends not to be located near the correct information.</td>
<td>Tasks in this level require the reader either to locate a piece of information based on a literal match or to enter information from personal knowledge onto a document. Little, if any, distracting information is present. The numbers to be used are provided and the arithmetic operation to be performed is specified.</td>
</tr>
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INTERTEXTUAL MOVES AND THE ESSENTIAL SKILLS FRAMEWORK

The operation of the test tasks and their model of information processing, spin-off tests, level descriptions and notion of a suitable minimum are incorporated directly into the federal Canadian Essential Skills framework. This framework was originally designed to establish occupational skill standards that could be correlated with international assessment results in order to explore and establish the relationship between literacy abilities, job performance and, by extension, productivity and economic growth (Jones 1995b; Jones 2005). However, the policy-makers who oversaw the project were interested in its relevance for supporting skill development in educational and vocational training contexts (Mair 1997). That is the primary way that the framework has been put to use at the federal level and in many provinces, despite strident cautions against such uses (see Jackson 2005; Pankhurst 2005).

The framework’s developer was also involved in the development of the IALS and subsequent analysis of results related to the IALS and ALL. In other words, a high level of expertise about the operation of the international assessment was used to build the Essential Skills framework. Key operational devices and regulatory principles from the test are carried into the curriculum framework. First, the five OECD assessment levels are used as the developmental hierarchy for the framework, but are renamed complexity levels. Next, the three skill domains used in IALS and ALL (i.e. prose, document and quantitative) are transposed in a very direct way to develop the following skill domains in the Essential Skills: reading text, document use and numeracy. A writing domain is also included in the Essential Skills. These four domains are referred to as the literacy domains. The Essential Skills (ES) has five additional domains: oral communication, computer use, thinking, working with others and continuous learning, which are simply referred to as the essential skills. With the amalgamation of OECD assessment levels and skill domains into a competency-based framework an intertextual hierarchy is established when the regulating principles of competency-based curriculum development are used to reformulate the texts associated with the international literacy assessment. In turn, the amalgamated system is
then extended to regulate novel aspects of the Essential Skills framework that are not included in the international assessment. Even though only three of the eight ES domains are directly related to the IALS, the levelling system is extended to provide a developmental hierarchy for additional skill domains: oral communication, computer use and thinking (continuous learning and working with others are not levelled). Also incorporated into the ES framework are the level descriptions. They are kept intact for reading text and document use, and extended for numeracy. They are also used to develop the writing domain. To do this, since writing was not tested in the OECD assessments, the developer used the variables that make the reading related test tasks difficult as a basis to develop writing complexity levels. The extension of the information-processing model to create a description of writing demonstrates the power of the regulating properties of the methodology when it is used in a different context.

The completed framework, in combination with extensive questionnaires about job activities, was then used to create what are called job profiles – that is, detailed and highly regulated descriptions of observable job performance. Gathering the information to profile over 300 occupations were groups of trained profilers, often literacy educators who attended a one-week training session and received a certification. They became adept at learning what is referred to as the Essential Skills methodology. In other words, they were introduced to key aspects of the international assessment’s operation and methods, such as the basic principles and processes of test task development using the information-processing model, how to interpret and use the level descriptions as learning objectives, and how to use and interpret spin-off tests. Trained profilers also used their expertise to develop learning activities and informal assessments for programme and individual use, often promoting the approach for its relevance to adult learners and workplace learning. The profilers acquired the methods and practices of a privileged literacy and, similar to the international assessment’s test developers and managers, became literacy experts in the context of the Essential Skills initiative and related projects.

The profilers’ expertise gradually displaced all other literacy learning expertise related to community development, family literacy, academic learning and more critical and social approaches related to workplace learning. This happened when the federal department that funds literacy and vocational training projects, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), directed funding to projects that further developed and incorporated the Essential Skills framework and related spin-off tests. For example, when working with adult learners it became a mandatory requirement to use the TOWES or PDQ or other non-standardised spin-offs. To do any work related to adult literacy development, it had to be reformulated to fit into an Essential Skills discourse and related assessments and curricula. Those most familiar with that discourse and the methods and practices of the Essential Skills methodology were able to access funding for project work. Furthermore, to be eligible to work on some federally funded projects, educators had to demonstrate their expertise, usually by indicating they had participated in an Essential Skills methodology course. Although the development of occupational profiles has been completed, the course developed for the profilers has been reformulated, and is now offered as part of a comprehensive online adult literacy practitioner training programme sponsored by a post-secondary institution (see Douglas College, n.d.).

Canada has never had a comprehensive and systematic organisational mechanism devoted to supporting adult learning and literacy development, whether in the context of work, community, family or access to further education. For years, literacy advocates have been lobbying for a pan-Canadian literacy strategy, a policy mechanism that could be used to establish a sustained approach to addressing adult literacy development. That strategy has been realised, without democratic participation or discussion, and even without fully recognising that it has happened. Literacy educators, advocates and policy-makers have hooked into the assessment regime’s discourse and practices ‘supplanting alternative policy-oriented discourses’, even though ‘no one seems to be imposing anything on anybody’ (Smith 1999, 175; Darville in press). The Essential Skills and TOWES, devolved from the OECD’s assessment regime, have arguably become Canada’s unsanctioned national adult literacy education strategy.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have explicated how texts and textual devices – test tasks and their model of information processing, spin-off tests, level descriptions and level implications – developed in the context of an international literacy assessment initiative are transposed into the context of adult literacy education as part of the Essential Skills, a competency-based occupational standards framework. Although adaptations are made as the texts and textual devices are incorporated into the framework, they carry with them many of the operational principles and procedures of the testing methodology and
regulate the development of subsequent curricular texts. They also carry the ideological interests of the OECD to ensure individual productivity potential and competitiveness. Once the texts enter into local programmes via the Essential Skills, related spin-off assessments and instructional materials developed by educators who have gained methodological expertise, they mediate how literacy is conceptualised, taught and valued. The textual analysis revealed the following:

- the fundamentally discursive construction of large-scale testing projects, from conceptualisation to model development through to the development of test items and scoring systems
- the paucity of mechanisms in the test task methodology that can be used to inform educators about actual literacy uses in people’s daily lives, and its developmental trajectory
- the absence of pedagogically useful insights
- the reformulation of test methods and spin-off tests for pedagogical use, despite their methodological limitations
- the intertextual amalgamation of large-scale assessment texts and textual devices into competency-based curriculum development processes
- the operation and mediating power of regulatory texts when extending the newly developed curriculum framework for other skill domains
- the displacement and disestablishment of literacy learning expertise.

Behind the array of statistics, tables and graphs produced by the international assessment initiative, and constructed to supply the raw numerical data for complex psychometric processes is a sophisticated discursive technology that can be analysed and critiqued for its textual construction, its singular developmental trajectory

1 The five variables used to establish test task difficulty are (1) the type of processing involved; (2) the type of information being requested; (3) the type of match or connection between the question and correct answer; (4) the length and complexity of the text itself; and (5) the plausibility of distractors within the text (Kirsch, 2001).

2 Arguably, a test-taker would need the equivalent of eight to ten years of formal education to respond to test tasks with the lowest scores. The median readability of the test tasks is Grade 8 (see Kirsch 2001). More importantly, a test-taker needs to have in-depth test-taking experience to understand the operation of the test and test questions, and to recognise that the test, despite its claims of authenticity, thwarts attempts to draw on actual problem-solving abilities that one may use with similar-looking texts (see Henningsen 2007; Maddox, this volume).

3 An important aspect of the competency-based approach is the emphasis on the development of basic skills to prepare for full participation in life endeavours beyond school. To ensure that the basic skills are acquired, they are stated in terms of observable and measurable outcomes, ‘the single most important feature of the competency approach’ (Jackson 1988, 26).

REFERENCES


