

First Reactions to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Results

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The OECD today released the results of the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), a study long awaited by the literacy and essential skills community, the federal and provincial/territorial governments, researchers, and academics. This paper is a first reaction to the results. My perspective is based on a reading of the documents issued today, listening to the OECD press conference, the Canadian webinar, and the OECD webinar, a review of the documents associated with previous international surveys, and my own personal association with the literacy surveys since 1989 both from inside the federal government and as a consultant. This paper will highlight points of interest and concern. It will also suggest how the results might affect Canadian policy and practice.

INTRODUCTION

PIAAC sets out to directly measure skills in three domains – literacy, numeracy, and “problem-solving in technology-rich environments.” In addition, those respondents with very low literacy skills bypassed the full assessments in literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments, and went directly to a test of basic reading component skills. PIAAC also asked respondents to provide background information and to fill out a survey of skills used at work.

The international report, entitled OECD Skills Outlook 2013 First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, reports on the results from the direct assessment measures and the survey of skills used at work. The results from the reading component assessment are to be the subject of a subsequent report.

The Canadian report, entitled Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), reports mainly on the direct assessment measures – literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments.

I noticed the differences in the titles of the two reports – the OECD focuses on skills, while Canada maintains the term “competencies” in its title. The OECD links the results to its overall skills strategy. This morning the OECD Secretary General called it a “tool to better

¹ Please note, the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN) commissioned me to prepare this paper. However, the opinions expressed here are completely my own and not those of CLLN, its Board of Directors or staff. I welcome your comments and reactions – brigid.hayes@rogers.com.

position workers for success.” Its report is more fulsome than the Canadian report. For example, the OECD report has three chapters containing content not reported in the Canadian report. These chapters deal with how skills are used in the workplace, developing and maintaining key skills, and the link to economic and social well-being. The differences in the two reports were unexpected. For the last international survey, the Canadian report mirrored, for the most part, the subject matter of the international report.

While both reports are “first results”, the Canadian report does not outline what further work might be forthcoming, nor did federal government officials mention additional planned reports during a webinar held today. The international report promises a reading component report, a thematic study on migrants, a comparison with the results in IALS and IALSS, as well as an online assessment tool based on PIAAC-defined skills. The OECD will be publishing results from a second round of PIAAC surveys involving nine countries in 2016.

COMPARING PREVIOUS SURVEYS

For Canadians, PIAAC is the latest in a series of literacy skills surveys beginning with *Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities* (LSUDA) 1989, the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) 1994, and the *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey* (IALSS) 2003 (this survey is known internationally as the *Adult Literacy and Life skills Survey* (ALL)). Because of this history, many Canadians awaited the PIAAC results in order to compare with previous surveys.

The OECD however called PIAAC a “first” in measuring skills and linked it to PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment, an assessment of 15 year olds’ reading, mathematics and science skills. The Secretary General of the OECD stated in his press conference today he sees PIAAC as the “PISA for adults” and hopes that PIAAC becomes a household name as PISA has become (I suppose this would be among households of statisticians and education consultants). The international report does not explain how PIAAC links to PISA since the elements assessed in the two surveys are not the same.

The international report is confusing when it comes to the question of whether one can compare PIAAC with previous surveys. The report begins by stating PIAAC “was designed to provide reliable comparisons with the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)... and the Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL). Yet two paragraphs later, the report states, “[t]he results from the Survey of Adult Skills cannot be directly compared with the results from IALS and ALL surveys.”² However, it then goes on to do just that, or at least that is what a quick first reading led me to believe.

² OECD. *OECD Skills Outlook 2013 First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*. 2013. p. 96.

A more careful reading of the report (certainly calling for higher level literacy skills) seems to indicate that one cannot directly compare the surveys. What the OECD has done is to combine and re-estimated the results for prose and document literacy along with numeracy from IALSS so they can be presented on a common scale as the PIAAC report. This means you cannot use the data from the original reports, but, when comparing to IALSS, you must use the figures in the PIAAC report.

Here then is the data from the PIAAC report comparing IALSS and PIAAC.

Table 1 - Averages and proficiency levels of population aged 16 to 65 in ALL and PIAAC, Canada, 2003 and 2012³

Literacy	2003	2012
Average Score	280	274
4/5	18%	14%
3	41%	38%
2	27%	32%
1	10%	13%
Below Level 1	5%	4%

Numeracy	2003	2012
Average Score	272	266
4/5	14%	13%
3	37%	33%
2	31%	32%
1	13%	17%
Below Level 1	5%	6%

You will note from this table that Canada's performance is not as strong as in 2003. As an additional point of comparison, here is a table comparing IALS and IALSS.

³ Statistics Canada and Employment and Social Development Canada. Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Chart 4.1, page 55.

Table 2 – Averages and proficiency levels of population aged to 65 in IALS and IALSS, Canada, 1994 and 2003⁴

Prose	1994	2003
Average Score	279	281
4/5	22.3%	19.5%
3	36.4%	38.6%
2	24.8%	27.3%
1	16.6%	14.6%

Document	1994	2003
Average Score	279	281
4/5	25.7%	20.5%
3	32.7%	36.9%
2	23.7%	27.0%
1	17.9%	15.5%

PIAAC: In the Tradition of IALS and IALSS

PIAAC follows the tradition of previous surveys. The methodology posits that certain skills matter in life and that these skills can be measured. In this regard, however, only certain skills can be measured in a cost effective method across dozens of countries. Reading and numeracy are more easily measured. As the Secretary General said today at the press conference, “if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it. If not, you’re left with intuition.”

These measures are constructs of literacy and numeracy and may or may not reflect what people do in everyday life.

Other important features such as use of literacy skills or social capital benefits are gathered through self-reporting. While this is a bona fide means of gathering the information, it seems to have less value, at least in the Canadian report where results from self-reporting are not mentioned.

Following the publication of IALS and IALSS, numerous authors challenged the construct on which the surveys were based. Some felt they did not reflect literacy practices,

⁴ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Statistics Canada. [Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003](#). Tables 1.8 and 1.9, pages 120 – 121.

The claim that this is a robust indicator of an individual person's complex multi-layered set of literacy practices has never been fully discussed and must be treated with caution. The surveys really provide data on one type of activity, namely a particular kind of text consumption in a developed society.⁵

Others question the validity of these large scale assessments (see Reder).⁶ These concerns, which stem in part from philosophical differences, are not likely to abate with the publication of PIAAC.

PIAAC continues the tradition of being a national snapshot of skills. As such, it contains a wealth of information at the macro level. It can also provide indications of how literacy training might be adapted. However, it has limited application for the classroom.

WHAT'S NEW

Problem solving in technology rich environments

Several features of PIAAC are quite interesting. The first is the new skill domain of problem solving in technology rich environments (PS-TRE). This is an effort to understand “using digital technology, communication tools and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others and perform practical tasks.” The first round of PIAAC focused 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.”⁷

Problem solving in technology rich environments includes:

- Cognitive Skills
 - setting goals and monitoring progress,
 - planning,
 - acquiring and evaluating information,
 - using information,
- Technology Dimensions
 - Web
 - Spreadsheet

⁵ St. Clair, Ralf. “The limits of levels: Understanding the International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS).” *International Review of Education*. January 20, 2013. p. 773.

⁶ Reder, Stephen. “Some Thoughts on IALS Measurement Validity, Program Impact, and Logic Models for Policy Development.” Centre for Literacy Fall Institute 2011 IALS Its Meaning and Impact for Policy and Practice. 2011.

⁷ OECD. *The Survey of Adult Skills. Reader's Companion*. p. 30.

- e-mail
- Context
 - Personal
 - Work-related
 - Society and community
- Complexity
 - Single step
 - Multiple steps
- Constraints
 - Ill-defined problem statement
 - Well-defined problem statement⁸

This new domain is interesting as it is an attempt to look at what people do in daily life. Unfortunately, there are some problems with this measure. First, one needed to be able to use a computer. In Canada, 19% of PIAAC survey participants were unable or chose not to use a computer and so were not included in the results. The sample questions provided in the international report are supposed to reflect personal, society/community, and work environments. Yet all of the sample questions require knowledge of email and spreadsheets, for example, sorting emails into folders. For adult Canadians not in school, these skills would have likely only have been developed in a work situation. This means certain individuals may have scored lower since they had not had the chance to develop these particular skills at work, even if they had the computer skills.

A new level – “Below Level 1”

PIAAC has created a new category of “Below Level 1.” In earlier studies, people who were unable to complete the assessment were left out of survey results. Using tools developed in the International Survey of Reading Skills, PIAAC was able to learn more about those at the lowest level. In Canada, 4% of those surveyed fell into this category.

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 levels is helpful.

How Levels are Used

PIAAC still divides respondents’ scores into levels (3 or 5 depending on the domain). This is meant to provide an easier way of understanding the results. PIAAC however does not make the claim that level 3 is a benchmark or a standard. This is a major change, and in my opinion, a welcome one.

⁸ OECD. *The Survey of Adult Skills. Reader’s Companion*. p. 32.

The focus on levels gave the mistaken impression that people move along the continuum in a one dimensional fashion. In the past, we spoke about “moving people to level 3” and several jurisdictions set goals related to achieving level 3. PIAAC is far more nuanced about an “ideal.”

Even without stating that level 3 is the standard, I must note that the Secretary General indicated that PIAAC itself is a benchmark and the graphs presented in the international report were “meant to be alarming” in order to stimulate governments into action. Let’s hope that the action does not lead to a return to focusing on level 3.

Adding the numbers

A particularly challenging aspect of the previous surveys was the tendency to add levels and come up with an “illiteracy” rate. Even today, a Quebec news report added level 1 and level 2 to state that “49%” of Quebecers have low literacy skills. In fact, had they added the “below level 1” group, that number would have been 53%!

Without the focus on level 3, I hope comments from government and from the literacy community will be better articulated.

ELEMENTS OF INTEREST

In reviewing all the material today and listening to two webinars and one press conference, several points struck me as providing food for thought and data for further analysis.

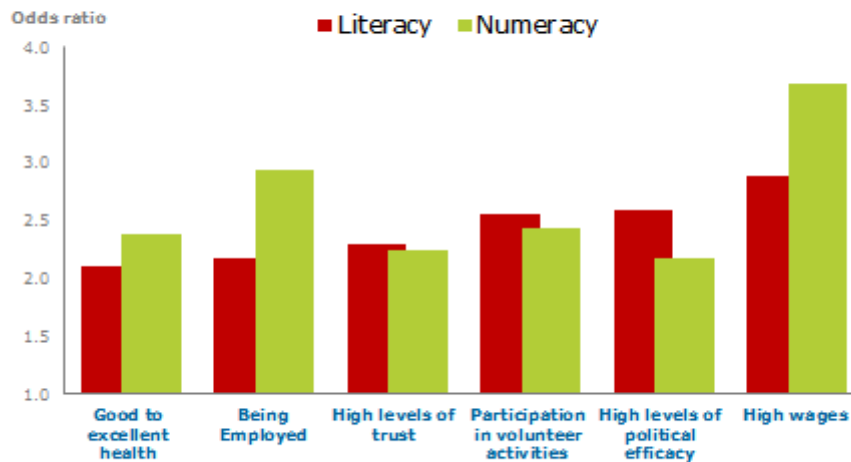
Focus on Social Well-Being

The international report draws upon information gathered from survey participants on the level of trust in others; political efficacy or the sense of influence on the political process; participation in associative, religious, political or charity activities (volunteering); and self-assessed health status.

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.”

Figure 1 – Likelihood of Positive Social and Economic Outcomes among Highly Proficient Adults⁹

Likelihood of positive social and economic outcomes among highly proficient adults
 (scoring at Level 4/5 compared with those scoring at Level 1 or below)



This data should be analysed further for it has implications far beyond the teaching of literacy. It is a shame that the Canada report is silent on this topic.

Focus on Inequality

The international report stresses the importance of the distribution of skills, that is, how equal those skills are distributed. This reminded me of the 1994 release where an effort was made to highlight the value of not having huge variations in distribution of skills. This perspective was lost in the subsequent years.

In the OECD press conference and during the OECD webinar today, speakers took the time to point out how the United Kingdom and the United States, both with huge ranges in skills distribution, are successful economically at a macro level. Basically, the two countries must “extract” the full value of those with the higher skills since they cannot rely on the skills of the labour force in general. Countries with a narrow distribution of skills utilize the skills of more people. While Japan scored highest in PIAAC, it has a rigid labour market that prevents women who have strong skills from accessing comparable jobs.

⁹ Presentation by Andreas Schleicher, OECD Deputy Director for Education and Skills. October 8, 2013.

Another element raised in today's briefings was the notion that a good "system" should de-link the performance of a student or a worker from their family background. In many countries, family background predicts literacy levels. In a better system, having strong skills should allow you to break away.

Succession Planning

The international report takes a look at the skills of those leaving the workforce (ages 55 – 65) and those entering the workforce (ages 16 – 24). For example, in Korea, 1% of those aged 55 – 65 score at level 4/5, while 6% of those 16 – 24 score at the same level. By comparison, in the United States, 42% of those aged 55 – 65 score at level 4/5, but only 28% of those 16 – 24 score at the same level. You can see how in Korea the new entrants have stronger skills than those that are leaving. When you combine this with the fact that skills deteriorate with age, the situation in US will likely prove to be a difficult challenge. In Canada, we have 5% of those aged 55 – 65 at level 4/5 and only 4% of those aged 16 – 24 at level 4/5. In terms of the average skills, Canadians aged 55 – 65 had an average score of 260 for literacy compared to 276 for those aged 16 – 24.

Education is not the same as skills

The international report devotes quite a bit of text to the question of educational qualifications and skills. Education levels are related to literacy levels. However, the OECD found that education qualifications were not necessarily a good indication of skills. It also seems that people in different countries with the same level of education have different PIAAC scores (the example given was that young Japanese and Dutch high school graduates outperform university graduates from Italy).

Impact of Initial Education

The OECD places importance on initial education. What is not learned during initial education is hard to remediate among adults. Countries that do well focus on initial education and also adult education. Flexible or modularized instruction, free adult education, especially for the most disadvantaged, with support for income replacement, transportation, and childcare were mentioned as successful strategies. Encouraging employers to create literacy rich jobs where workers can use and practice their skills are also key. Easy to find information about lifelong learning opportunities and labour market information are critical.

CANADA'S REPORT

Canada's participation in PIAAC is notable for its inclusiveness, compared to previous surveys. Oversampling and the participation of all provinces and territories means that more data is available than ever before. For the first time, data is available for each jurisdiction. Oversampling has produced good information on off-reserve Aboriginal people along with those who live in the territories, official language minority communities, and immigrants.

Country Ranking

Canada has participated in every survey since 1994 along with the Netherlands, Australia, Norway, and the United States. Among these five countries, Canada has been number 3, number 2, and number 4, respectively. It has consistently ranked ahead of the US.

Table 3 – Ranking of Countries, 1994, 2003, 2013, Prose and Literacy Scales

	IALS (1994)	IALSS (2003)	PIAAC (2013)
1	Norway	Norway	Japan
2	Netherlands	Canada	Finland
3	Canada	Netherlands	Netherlands
4	New Zealand	Australia	Australia
5	Australia	New Zealand	Sweden
6	United States	Switzerland	Norway
7	Switzerland	Hungary	Estonia
8	Hungary	United States	Flanders (Belgium)
9			Czech Republic
10			Slovak Republic
11			Canada
12			Average
13			Korea
14			England/N. Ireland
15			Denmark
16			Germany
17			United States
18			Austria
19			Cyprus
20			Poland
21			Ireland
22			France
23			Spain
24			Italy

Today during the Canadian webinar, the suggestion was made that Canada ought to compare itself to the G7 countries, rather than OECD countries. If this was the case, Canada would be second behind Japan, with the UK, Germany, the US, France, and Italy following. It should be noted that data from France is not included in the Canada report as it was not available at the time of writing the report.

Using the information on the provinces and territories, it is possible to see how they would rank if they were countries. Over 50% of the provinces/territories have higher scores than the OECD and the Canadian averages (on the literacy scale).

Table 4 – PIAAC Literacy Average Scores and Percentage at each level, Countries and Canadian Provinces and Territories

	Average Score	Below Level 1	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4/5
Japan	296.2	0.6	4.4	23.1	49.2	22.8
Finland	287.5	2.7	8.0	26.5	40.7	22.2
Netherlands	284.0	2.6	9.3	27.0	42.4	18.6
Australia	280.4	3.2	9.6	29.7	40.1	17.3
Sweden	279.2	3.7	9.6	29.1	41.6	16.1
Norway	278.4	3.1	9.5	30.9	42.6	14.0
Alberta	277.7	2.8	12.4	29.6	39.3	15.8
Prince Edward Island	277.5	3.0	10.6	31.7	40.8	13.9
Yukon	277.2	4.3	12.2	27.9	39.5	16.1
Estonia	275.9	2.0	11.0	34.4	40.8	11.8
Flanders (Belgium)	275.5	2.9	11.9	31.2	40.9	13.1
Ontario	275.5	3.9	11.1	31.8	38.3	14.9
British Columbia	274.8	4.4	12.4	29.1	38.7	15.4
Czech Republic	274.0	1.5	10.3	37.7	41.7	8.7
Nova Scotia	273.9	2.3	13.6	34.4	36.0	13.7
Manitoba	273.9	4.2	11.8	32.3	37.6	14.1
Slovak Republic	273.8	1.9	9.8	36.3	44.5	7.5
Canada	273.5	3.8	12.7	32.0	37.6	13.9
Average	273.3	3.3	12.1	33.6	38.9	12.1
Korea	272.6	2.2	10.7	37.1	41.8	8.1
England/N. Ireland (UK)	272.5	3.3	13.3	33.7	36.4	13.3
Saskatchewan	271.6	3.4	13.9	32.6	38.9	11.2
Denmark	270.8	3.8	11.9	34.1	40.1	10.0
USA	269.8	4.1	14.2	34.0	35.7	12.0
Austria	269.5	2.5	13.1	37.9	38.0	8.6
Germany	269.5	3.3	14.5	34.4	37.0	10.8
Cyprus	268.8	1.9	12.5	40.1	39.0	6.5
Quebec	268.6	4.1	14.9	34.3	35.5	11.3
New Brunswick	268.3	3.5	15.0	34.9	36.2	10.3
Poland	266.9	3.9	14.8	36.5	35.0	9.7
Ireland	266.5	4.3	13.2	37.7	36.2	8.5
Newfoundland and Labrador	265.4	3.4	17.2	36.2	33.6	9.6
France	262.0	5.3	16.2	35.9	34.0	10.4
Northwest Territories	253.3	9.0	22.5	32.3	26.2	10.0
Spain	251.8	7.3	20.4	39.5	28.0	4.8
Italy	250.5	5.6	22.3	42.3	26.5	3.3
Nunavut	219.1	24.1	31.6	27.5	13.5	3.4

Numeracy scores are lower than literacy scores. Canada was 14th among all countries surveyed. Only Alberta scored higher than the OECD average, and Ontario and BC scored higher than the Canadian average.

For PS-TRE, 36.6% of Canadians who participated in the test fell within levels 2 and 3. This was higher than the OECD average and Canada was 7th among all countries. Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia had higher percentages at levels 2 and 3 than the Canadian average.

Many of the previously established relationships hold true in PIAAC. In general, those with higher levels of education, younger people, those in managerial and professional occupations, and the employed have stronger skills.

Aboriginal People

The information on Aboriginal people, while limited to off-reserve and those living in the territories, is rich. While Aboriginal people have lower levels across the domains than do non-Aboriginal people, those living in Ontario have average literacy scores similar to those of Quebec and New Brunswick, while those Aboriginal people from BC have average literacy scores similar to Newfoundland and Labrador. On the other hand, Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan, Yukon, NWT, and Nunavut have average literacy scores lower than the lowest scoring country in PIAAC (Italy). Similar results, although lower, are found for numeracy.

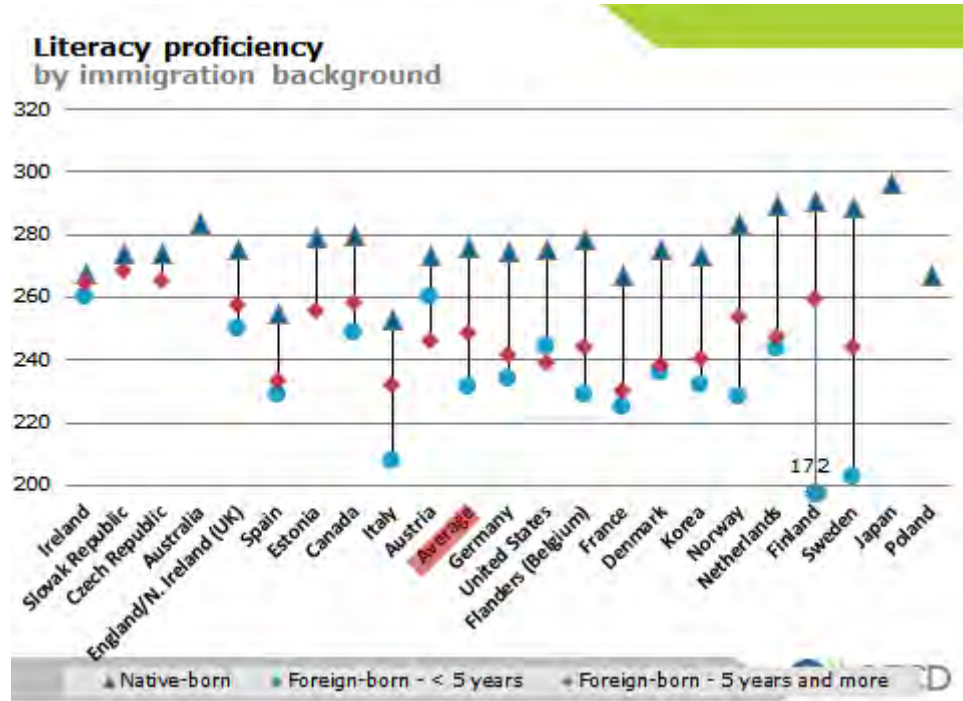
Gaps between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people are not large when looking at PS-TRE level 2/3 in Ontario (35.9% vs. 39.2%), Manitoba (30.5% vs. 36.2%), BC (35.1% vs. 40.2%), and Canada (30.3% vs. 37.6%). Large gaps exist in Saskatchewan (13.2 points), Yukon (24.8 points), and NWT (25.9 points). Data was not sufficient to examine the situation in Nunavut.

Immigration

The international report focused on the performance on recent immigrants, those having arrived less than 5 years ago, and established immigrants. It made the point that some countries are much better at improving the scores of established immigrants. The chart that follows shows the range in scores of three groups – native born, foreign born less than 5 years, and foreign born more than five years. Looking at countries such as Finland and Sweden, you can see how more established immigrants have moved closer in their scores to native born. By contrast, some countries exhibit no movement between new and established immigrants, e.g. Spain, US, Denmark, Netherlands. Austrian established

immigrants appear to be worse off than new immigrants are. In the case of Canada, one can see some movement along the continuum.

Figure 2 – Literacy Proficiency by Immigration Background¹⁰



In Canada, established immigrants have slightly higher literacy average scores than recent immigrants. However, in two of the provinces that oversampled for immigrants – Quebec and Ontario – there is virtually no difference in average scores between recent immigrants and those who have been in Canada more than five years. Definitely, this area requires further study.

The Canada report has much more information about official language minorities and demographics than can be reviewed here. I would encourage people to read the Canada report and the international summary, [Skilled for Life? Key Findings from the Survey of Adult Skills](#).

¹⁰ Presentation by Andreas Schleicher, OECD Deputy Director for Education and Skills. October 8, 2013.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The objective of the assessment is to describe the level and distribution of the skills of the adult population, not to test the proficiency of individuals.¹¹

The above quote represents one of the key messages of PIAAC. We need to understand and use PIAAC for the purpose it was designed.

PIAAC ought to be one of a number of sources of information about literacy skills, practices and impacts, not the only one.

Implications for Research

Already, OECD has provided more accessible information than in the 2003 survey. Interactive charts on the OECD website allow you to compare countries on several variables. The website promises access to the data for researchers. Ensuring a broad examination of the data by a wide variety of players will help to flesh out the findings. By not restricting access to the data to governments and government-sanctioned researchers, a range of perspectives and analysis are possible.

The federal government could support this work through funding to academics, literacy organizations, Aboriginal groups, immigrant groups, official language minority communities, and researchers to examine the various elements. Some areas that require further Canadian analysis include:

- Information about the incidence and intensity of the use of generic skills and literacy, numeracy and PS-TRE in the workplace, as well as other elements contained in the international report
- How Canada fares on dimensions such as the level of trust in others; political efficacy or the sense of influence on the political process; participation in associative, religious, political or charity activities (volunteering); and self-assessed health status
- The link between PISA and PIAAC and what this means for Canada
- Skills mismatch and qualifications mismatch – OECD suggests that the latter is more important and that the former is not as important as previously thought
- The reasons established immigrants do not seem to score better than expected

¹¹ OECD. [International Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Surveys in the OECD Region](#). September 2009.

- The role of language in PIAAC – the implications of test taking in one official language. What does this mean for Aboriginal people, immigrants, and official language minorities
- A better understanding of PS-TRE, its limitations due to the number of people who opted out, its reliance on “office” type skills
- The implications of the PIAAC domains on the Essential Skills Framework, especially PS-TRE and the essential skills of critical thinking and computer use
- Examination of cohorts based on the 1994 survey and PIAAC (Table B5.1 of the international report has this data. Someone who was 16 in 1994 would be 34 in 2012. Comparing their average scores could give cohort information.)

Implications for Policy

The Canadian report provides much of the “what” but not much of the “why” and little of “what to do.” What we do with this data, how we interpret it, how policies are shaped are all a matter of choice.

At the recent Centre for Literacy Summer Institute, *Learning from IALS, Preparing for PIAAC*, an international panel exemplified the range of choices countries can make. Some chose to focus on individuals who were at level 1, investing in training and support. Others made large financial investments in adult education. Many Canadian jurisdictions chose to embrace moving individuals to level 3.

We need to open a conversation about what choices we will make, assessing the pros and cons of a variety of approaches. We could look to other countries that have consistently performed well to see what works, and once we understand this, we can move towards action.

Leadership is required, perhaps from the federal level, to bring all the players together to assess and then formulate a strategy that respects provincial jurisdiction but allows for concerted action across the country. The conversation should not just include those ministries in all jurisdictions connected with education and training, but also immigration, health, social services, official languages, and Aboriginal affairs.

The OECD has positioned PIAAC as part of its skills strategy. This gives the literacy community the opportunity to reach out to other stakeholders, business, labour, employability groups, sector councils, and others who have an interest in skills. At the same time, PIAAC is rich with information about social capital and health outcomes. Partners

from the health, justice, civil society, and equity groups all have an interest in improving the social capital of Canadians.

The international report is peppered with policy suggestions. I have listed them here in an abridged version, because I believe they can form the basis of a conversation here in Canada. These suggestions are rich, wide-ranging, and innovative.

OECD's Key Points for Policy¹²

- Provide high-quality initial education and lifelong learning opportunities
- Make lifelong learning opportunities accessible to all
- Make sure all children have a strong start in education
- Develop links between the world of learning and the world of work
- Provide training for workers
- Ensure that the training is relevant
- Allow workers to adapt their learning to their lives
- Identify those most at risk of poor skills proficiency
- Show how adults can benefit from better skills
- Provide easy-to-find information about adult education activities
- Recognise and certify skills proficiency
- Provide high-quality early childhood education and childcare at reasonable cost
- Encourage employers to hire individuals who temporarily withdrew from the labour force
- Encourage older workers to remain in the labour market
- Create more flexible working arrangements to accommodate workers with care obligations and disabilities
- Tax policies should encourage workers to make their skills available to the labour market
- Take stock of the skills held by unemployed adults
- Offer economic rewards for greater proficiency
- Continue to promote educational attainment

¹² OECD. [Skilled for Life? Key Findings from the Survey of Adult Skills](#). 2013.

- Collect timely information about demand for and supply of skills
- Create flexible labour market arrangements
- Provide quality career guidance
- Ensure that qualifications are coherent and easy to interpret

Despite my concerns about the limitations of relying solely on PIAAC and the choices made about what was important (and easy) to measure, therefore what is valued, I am encouraged by the tone of 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.¹³

Let the conversation begin!

¹³ OECD. Skilled for Life? Key Findings from the Survey of Adult Skills. 2013. p. 30.