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Adult numeracy and the totally pedagogised society: PIAAC and other international surveys in the context of global educational policy on lifelong learning.

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Summary: This paper aims to discuss the emergence, form and likely effects of international surveys of adults' skills by locating them in the global context of policies on education and life long learning (LLL). It focuses on adults' numeracy and discusses its conceptualisation and assessment in the Project for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which is the most recent survey. Drawing on critical theoretical resources about new forms of governance in education and transformations in the pedagogic discourse, the paper further substantiates existing critiques of global policy trends, namely that they are motivated by human capital approaches to education and LLL. In particular, we show that the apparently commonsensical appeal of evaluative instruments like PISA and PIAAC is based on a competency model of knowledge, which embodies a narrow notion of competence. Relatedly, the notional curricula promoted by such surveys potentially articulate a more radical idea of LLL, captured by Bernstein's conception of trainability as the mode of socialisation into a totally pedagogised society. The paper presents a dual approach to understanding international adult performance surveys in general – in that, besides deploying the theoretical resources already indicated, it also raises a number of methodological issues relevant to the valid interpretation of these studies' results. Ultimately, it argues for the importance of mobilising resources from critical educational perspectives to support the development of potentially powerful knowledge like numeracy and to prevent its being reduced to a narrow competency.

Classification: D20 A40 C30

Keywords: adult numeracy; global educational policy; pedagogic discourse; international assessment surveys; survey methodology; PIAAC; competency models of knowledge; trainability; totally pedagogised society
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