Commodifying literacy, justifying inequality: timely relations in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

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This paper explores why statistical accounts have, over the past two decades, come to dominate discourses about adult literacy in Canada. I use a post-colonial, dialectical analysis of the OECD-sponsored International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) to examine what role literacy plays in the labour-capital social relation and explore how a statistical framing of adult literacy both perpetuates colonial practices and entrenches literacy within dominant social relations.

I contend that IALS was designed specifically to assert a set of norms which simultaneously entrenches literacy as a particular capacity that people are expected to possess while justifying the global imbalance of resources and development. I hope this analysis will help explain why current state intervention in adult literacy in many OECD nations works against the interests of adult literacy students rather than supporting them in negotiating print structures which oppress and exclude them. I also hope that this analysis will contribute to a renewed—and deepened—understanding of the underlying causes of the dilemmas faced by so many literacy practitioners, researchers, program administrators and policy-makers in the Global North. Finally, I hope that this analysis will convince readers that ‘literacy’—as it is framed within IALS—concerns everyone, not just the people who IALS frames as deficient.

Background on IALS
The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was an OECD project which first collected data in 1994 in nine OECD member nations. Its aim, according to the National Literacy Secretariat (2000, p. 1) was to ‘provide the world’s first reliable and comparable estimates of the level and distribution of literacy skills in the adult population, and [offer] new insights into the factors that influence the development of adult skills at home and at work’. The survey designers state (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. xii) that the information provided would help guide OECD member nations in designing ‘lifelong learning, social and labour market policies’. The same report states (p. 1) that
IALS was part of an effort to allay the effects of ‘major structural changes in OECD countries’ that have resulted from ‘[g]lobalisation and the emergence of the knowledge-based society’, including ‘internationalization of production and of financial markets and…increased competition’.

IALS is one of several OECD surveys that seek to measure educational ‘competencies’ and outcomes in order to inform policy. According to the OECD (2005, p. 3), the aim of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), launched in 1997, was to ‘monitor the extent to which students near the end of compulsory schooling have acquired the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society’. The OECD (p. 6) considers the essential knowledge and skills to be ‘key competencies’ which are the ‘psychosocial prerequisites for a successful life and a well-functioning society’. IALS has similar aims, although its focus is on adults. The OECD and Statistics Canada (2000, p. x) state that within advanced industrialized nations, literacy is ‘a broad set of information-processing competencies’ and a ‘multiplicity of skills’. The designers of IALS are clear that is ‘a particular capacity and mode of behaviour’.

The IALS test asserts a version of reality in which literacy is a free-floating set of information-processing skills divorced from material reality. Hamilton and Barton (2000, p. 385) argue that ‘what the test is really measuring is an artificially constructed test literacy, sampling a transnational culture and tapping people’s participation in the global economy. This is a literacy but it is not literacy.’ Further, they state that Both OECD policy and the research uncritically support the new work-order vision of global capitalism and encourage people to see this as a fixture around which we need to adjust our lives and national policies, rather than as something which literacy might help shape according to a more humanitarian agenda.

IALS was the first international survey that attempted to link literacy to economic indicators in industrialized nations. Previously, statistical analyses sought correlations between educational attainments and prosperity in the Global North; literacy was the concern of UNESCO, which worked first in Eastern Europe and then in the Global South. Jones (1990, p. 58) has argued that UNESCO has often held a ‘limited view of literacy as a means of increasing economic and social development, especially through enhanced productivity’. This simplistic correlation between literacy and ‘progress’ has been widely criticized. As Graff (1995, p. 331) has argued, ‘there has been no one route to economic development, industrialization, political democracy, or other parcels of the “modernization” complex’. He points out (p. 49) that the first efforts to promote mass literacy ‘were tied to the reordering of society at a time of transformation’ and states that ‘this strong element of social order has never been lost’. I would argue that IALS is yet another example of attempts to use literacy to reorder society in the interests of economic elites.
In *Literacy in the Information Age* the OECD and Statistics Canada (2000, p. 11) argue that ‘literacy skills are an essential ingredient in the process of upskilling that accompanies the economic and social transformations that are occurring in the OECD countries’. This report boasts (p. 87) that IALS ‘covered 10.3 per cent of the world population…and 51.6 per cent of world GDP’ and asserts that ‘[c]ountries with higher levels of skills will adjust more effectively to the challenges and opportunities opened up by globalisation’. These quotes illustrate that IALS is attempting to assert or reinforce what Allman (1999, p. 54) calls the bourgeois notion of education. In this view knowledge is ‘a thing or compilation of things, bodies of knowledge, that some people possess (teachers and experts) and others need to acquire (students or learners)’.

Within capitalist social relations, it is not surprising that knowledge is considered an object that should be used to help individuals compete. Allman's dialectic analysis also reveals a deeper understanding of how education is being drawn more deeply into capitalist social relations. She points out (p. 75) that the ‘need to increase labour productivity’ is at the heart of one of the ‘most insidious and antagonistic paradoxes’ of capitalism: that companies compete with each other by lowering costs, yet require workers’ wages to be high enough so that they can afford to buy what is produced. As markets become saturated, people can no longer purchase commodities. This leads to falling profits. Companies respond by shedding costs, particularly through cutting workers’ pay, contracting out jobs, outsourcing or laying off workers. To create new markets and new sources of surplus value, Allman says (p.75) ‘the capitalist social relations of production must be expanded into alternative areas of human labour and also exported throughout the world’. Investing in the social forces of production, including education, is one way to create additional surplus value and forestall the collapse of the market economy.

**Discourses and reality**

In her 2001 critique of IALS, Hamilton (p. 178) argues that it is vitally important to ‘analys[e] and debat[e] the dominant public discourses of literacy that inform educational policy and practice’. She urges educational researchers to ‘focus less on what the teachers and learners are doing, and more on what the administrators, testers and government officials are doing with literacy’ so that we can we ‘understand more about how institutions produce and privilege certain kinds of knowing’.

To understand why IALS has been so effective at shaping discourse, I have found postcolonial applications of Foucault’s notion of governmentality extremely useful. Governmentality is understood as the techniques of social control which are part of political power in the modern era. Postcolonial scholars such as Mitchell (1988) have pointed out how European forms of
representation, including censuses and statistics, were essential to colonial rule. These representations had the power to transform rather than merely represent social forms. As such, they enacted what Kalpagam (2000, p. 47) terms ‘epistemic violence’. Further, Appadurai (1996, p. 120) has noted that even when the data in the British colonial census was incorrect, ‘their referential status became far less important than their discursive importance in supporting or subverting various classificatory moves and the policy arguments based on them’.

Critiques of IALS such as Darville (1999) and Hamilton & Barton (2000) have pointed out that its tested literacy is based on a mythic literacy of a projected future, that the levels are arbitrary, and that the reported findings dismiss individuals’ self-reported experiences with literacy. All of these examples illustrate the claims that the vast power of IALS is primarily ideological and has the power to reorganize practice. In other words, the accuracy of IALS is less important than what Appadurai (1996, p. 120) calls its ‘discursive importance.’ In this section I will discuss how the IALS discourse has begun to affect one group of people who the test labels as deficient and to reorganize practice in adult literacy programs in Canada.

**Impacts on racialized communities within OECD nations**

Although IALS does not explicitly address issues of ‘race’ it suffers from the all-too-common problem of obscuring how power operates through marginalizing certain groups of people. Reports based on the IALS findings (Coulombe et al, 2004, p. 12) insist that the tested nations are ‘homogeneous countries’ and (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. 88) that the test ‘achieved unprecedented levels of reliability in scoring open-ended items across cultures and languages’ because of its ‘psychometric approach’. These assumptions have not gone unnoticed. Hamilton & Barton (2000, p. 382) critiqued how the IALS tests normalized particular literacy practices and ‘treat[ed] culture as bias’ and Darville (1999, p. 274) pointed out how IALS constructed literacy as an element of ‘ruling relations’. These scholars argued that it is incorrect to assume that nations such as Canada are homogenous locales in which all literacy practices circulate on an equal basis. They have pointed out that print materials never circulate outside of a material, cultural and historical context saturated with power imbalances along lines of race, class and other markers of social difference. However, none of the critiques to date have paid explicit attention to the ways in which IALS justifies racialized disadvantage within current global capitalist relations.

I contend that, by failing to distinguish between the ability to process information and fluency in the language of the test, IALS labels anyone who scored at the lowest level of the test as potentially dangerous to themselves or others. Here is how the OECD (2000, p. xi) describes those whose IALS score would place them at Level One: ‘persons with very poor skills, where the individual may, for example, be unable to determine the correct amount of
medicine to give a child from information printed on the package’. This definition does not raise questions about how to ensure that information is presented in ways that do not endanger people or disadvantage some communities within the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of transnationalism. This has two effects: it erases the lived realities of many people, and ignores the implications of that erasure on particular communities. To discuss these problems I draw on the work of Blommaert (2008) and Bannerji (2005).

In *Grassroots Literacy* Blommaert uses New Literacy Studies to analyse documents written by two non-elite men who live in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He argues (2008, p. 24) that we need to pay attention to the ‘economies of literacy’ in which different literacies circulate because ‘communicative inequality [is] at the heart of contemporary globalisation processes’. Further, he points out (p. 40) that ‘[m]any if not most people in the world face literacy obstacles that have nothing to do with capabilities to produce writing, but that have to do with the unequal distribution and restricted accessibility of a material infrastructure for effective literacy’. He argues (pp. 199-200):

> The huge and threatening problem such people are facing is one of inequality: their voices are *systematically* in danger of being misunderstood, dismissed or silenced, not because of choice but because of far more complex and difficult issues that have to do with the ways in which we work and live within relatively stable sets of expectations and norms with respect to meaning, truth and voice.

I argue that IALS aims to create, and thereby to enforce, a set of expectations about literacy that is not just stable but restrictive. By eliding language familiarity and cognitive processing, IALS ignores any issues of access to resources. It ensures that people who are not fluent in the language and dominant culture where they live are, as Blommaert says (p. 200), ‘systematically in danger of being misunderstood, dismissed or silenced’.

Bannerji’s (2005) analysis of the powerful effects of discourse on lived experience helps explain the implications of this silencing. In ‘Building from Marx: Reflections on Class and Race’ she argues (p. 148) that ‘race’ is a ‘power-inscribed way--of reading or establishing difference, and finding a long-lasting means for reproducing such readings, organization and practice’. She reminds us that it is not possible to separate economic, political and cultural spheres from one another. Further, she states (p. 149) that these spheres work together as ‘active social organization’ that create ‘normalized and experiential knowledge about whose labour counts the least’ and can therefore be exploited the most.

IALS does not claim to rectify the economic inequalities that result from globalization. Instead, reports of its findings (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. 8) invoke the ‘fall in real wages of people with low skills and widening
earning differentials since the early 1980s’ as evidence that OECD member nations should focus on literacy that prepares individuals for ‘employment growth…especially in white-collar high-skilled occupations’. What these elegant and misleading correlations ignore is the growing racialization of poverty in many OECD nations.1

IALS rhetoric locates the ‘problem’ of economic growth in the individuals who fall into the construct of Level One. In Canada most of the people in this level are those who are not fluent in English or French, and a disproportionate number of indigenous people. Although this is a problem with the test, it gets reported as a problem with the individuals. And it has direct implications: in this climate, it is hardly surprising that immigration minister Jason Kenney felt free to state that immigrants who cannot speak English or French do not belong in Canada.ii

Impacts on adult literacy programs
Since the early 1990s, adult literacy in industrialized nations has been increasingly objectified and reclassified into categories created through IALS. Hautecoeur (1997, p. 153) has pointed out that during the 1990s most industrialized nations ‘made Draconian cuts in adult education and gave priority to economic and labour questions, seeing basic education as providing vocational qualifications and employability training’. In Canada, government departments which support adult literacy insist that programs focus on a narrow range of literacy outcomes tied to a framework of Essential Skills that articulates key competencies identified by the OECD through PISA and IALS. Increasing numbers of practitioners experience a profound disconnect between the real needs of learners in their classes and the demands placed on them by state funders. In addition, they now feel pressured to spend more time on paperwork than on working with the adults who the programs exist to teach.

Practitioners often respond to this predicament with dismay, puzzlement and frustration. They bemoan the fact that policies and funding seem driven by accountability rather than attempts to meet the needs of people who are marginalized because they lack basic education. Practitioners feel that the government policies are irrational, and most do not believe it is possible to effect change. While some may be aware that these pressures result from the past decade of neoliberal economic policies, the field as a whole has been unable to respond effectively to the poisoned environment in which they now work.

Allman (1999, p. 71) argues that many others feel this ‘stress’ and resent being turned from educators into ‘technicians whose intellectual and creative skills have been incorporated in learning packages’ which they are now expected to ‘disseminate, manage and assess’. She argues (p. 72) that this
experience is ‘exactly parallel to the long recorded process of deskilling in industrial labour—a process that facilitates the ability of capital to exploit or increase the exploitation of working people’.

**How IALS functions to reinforce capitalist social relations**

The way that IALS frames literacy and the relationship between individuals and the economy seems designed to justify neoliberalism and capitalist social relations rather than to reveal anything useful about what ‘literacy’ actually means in ‘advanced capitalist nations’. The IALS reports rely on a highly simplistic understanding of globalization, one which privileges the economic interests of the OECD nations and asserts that the structural adjustments of recent decades are the result of technological changes which are leading towards an ‘information age’. IALS also ignores the fundamental workings of capitalism: it erases the systemic way in which capital restlessly seeks to increase profits by lowering labour costs, and ignores how social organization operates to systematically devalue the labour of particular groups of people. Thus, through IALS, literacy becomes a mask which disguises the essence of capitalist social relations.

The IALS discourse also acts as an important disciplinary mechanism of neoliberalism. Its framing of literacy is used to convince people who live in the Global North that economic competition is inevitable, that each of us is responsible for our nation’s GDP, and that some people in our midst—usually racialized people who are not fluent in an official language—are a drain on our individual and national prosperity. It is used to convince ‘good citizens’ to fear unproductive people who are hampering the economy, and to blame themselves rather than the structures of capitalism if they become ‘unproductive’ or unemployed. Finally, literacy as it has been constructed in IALS has been used as justification for undermining the social safety net: one of the most recent reports based on IALS data (Coulombe et al, 2005) concludes that investments in ‘human capital accumulation’ are more beneficial to national economies than policies that support social infrastructure.

In order to understand and resist this discourse, we must name what ‘epistemic violence’ it enacts, by whom and in whose interests. Perhaps educators should follow the advice of Allman (1999, p. 55) who asserts that we need to stop ‘concern[ing] ourselves with struggles for greater access and equal opportunities so that everyone can acquire the educational commodities’ and should instead focus on transforming education into a collective process through which communities ‘use, test, question and produce’ knowledge that meets the needs of all.

**Bibliography**

Endnotes
i. See for example, the ‘Colour of Purple’ information sheets created by the Ontario group, Colour of Justice Network, at http://colourofpoverty.ca/.
ii. On March 20, 2009, radio news stories reported that Jason Keney, minister of citizenship, immigration and multiculturalism, was quoted as saying: “All I can say is if someone can’t conduct an immigration interview in English or French they don’t have basic competences.” Retrieved April 7, 2009 from: http://www.cbc.ca/mobile/text/story_news-topstories.html?ept/htm/story/2009/03/20/immigration-language-kenney.html

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