Measurement and Assessment in Adult Literacy and Essential Skills: A Critical Literature Review

Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures Project

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Executive Summary

The Learner Progressions Measures (LPM) research project assists the Government of Alberta in developing future directions, policies, and programming for literacy and essential skills. The project provides the Alberta ministries with information about the learner progression measures that are currently being used, other measures that might be appropriate, and ways to report results. In reviewing the selected literature on literacy and essential skills (LES) assessment measures, we hoped to find answers to the following questions:

- How is best practice for assessing learner progression described? What are the reasons for and implications of one practice being deemed better than another?
- What are the underlying theories about literacy and assessment? How do they influence the development and use of learner progression measures?
- How are these measures or tools used to make judgments about program quality?

Of course, the most important question to ask about any assessment is “why measure?” Measuring methods and tools that identify and organize information for funding and organizational accountability requirements are necessarily different from methods and tools that identify and organize information for learners, and differ again for program practices such as effective instruction. Each stakeholder in the LES field measures progress and uses the results of progression measures for different reasons and in different ways. Learners want to know if and how they have progressed. Practitioners and administrators need to plan learning programs and strategies as well as to report to funders about their programs’ success. Employers want a more productive and efficient workplace. And funders need to know which programs to fund and how best to shape effective policy.

Our review acknowledges the tension in merging literacy with essential skills, and the philosophical differences in which literacy is perceived either as a social practice or a set of discrete cognitive skills. Like these differing views of literacy, our research also identified conflicting views of learners and their achievements — whether their learning is to achieve their own complex goals or to prepare them to meet the needs of the economy.

After examining the relationship between stakeholders’ needs and the different views of literacy and learners, the review turns to survey the different kinds of LES assessment used across Canada and in eleven other countries. We conclude by recommending best practices in the context of the six values stated by the Government of Alberta’s Living Literacy framework (Government of Alberta, 2009). The review closes with detailed suggestions informed by these values. In particular, we insist that for assessments to be meaningful, they must go beyond our current proficiency-based tools to include and value self-reports from learners who are at the heart of adult literacy learning.
Introduction

This literature review on progression measurement in adult literacy and essential skills was conducted in 2013 as part of the Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures Project (LES:LPM). The researchers used a critical analytical approach to review a broad spectrum of literature on adult literacy and essentials skills, assessment, and measurement. In this review you will find a tremendous amount of information, a lot of critical questions, and some important considerations about the complexities of determining and measuring adult literacy and essential skills. We hope that this review will be useful to policy-makers, administrators, and practitioners as we all explore and reflect on how to best measure learners’ LES progress.

Project Background and Goals

The Learner Progressions Measures (LPM) research project aims to assist the Government of Alberta in developing future directions, policies, and programming for literacy and essential skills. The project will provide the ministries with information about the learner progression measures currently being used, other measures that might be appropriate, and ways to report results. We are working in tandem with another research project that is identifying promising practices in literacy and essential skills programs in Alberta. The broader context for both projects is to support and contribute to the Government of Alberta’s vision for its evolving literacy framework, which foresees Albertans having “the literacy competencies to participate fully and successfully in living, learning and work” (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 6).

We began by reviewing some literature on the subject of literacy and essential skills (LES) assessment measures. The review included books, articles, unpublished papers, and both research and government reports from many locations in Canada as well as eleven other countries:

- Australia
- Belgium
- Denmark
- New Zealand
- Norway
- Scotland
- South Africa
- Spain
- United Kingdom
- USA
- Wales

Our reading provided a good overview of LES assessment measures and the policies and perspectives related to them.
Approach to the Literature Review

We bring to this work many decades of experience in community-based literacy programs in Alberta and in the LES field as a whole. We’ve worked as local community-based program coordinators, researchers, writers, and senior staff at provincial literacy organizations. We have been on both sides of funding requests, having applied for program funding and having sat at funding tables deciding which proposals to approve. We’ve met and worked closely with learners, practitioners, and community and government stakeholders from across the country. Adding to our own experiences and perspectives, we were part of the Learner Progressions Measures Task Force Team that represented a broad cross-section of literacy and essential skills practice in Alberta. The task force was made up of LES practitioners and researchers from the Adult Literacy Research Institute at Bow Valley College, the Alberta Workforce Essentials Skills Society, and the Further Education Society of Alberta.

Our experiences have taught us to view literacy as a complex and contextually situated social practice. We view learners as capable and recognize that good LES practice builds on the strengths that learners already possess. We also understand the inherent challenges in developing measures of learner progress that meet the competing needs of all stakeholders.

As we approached the literature review, which set the stage for and informed the remainder of the LPM research project, we wanted to find out:

- what people are discovering and thinking about measuring learner progress;
- what the policy implications are of using various progression measures for particular purposes; and
- whether measures of learner progress are applied in the same way in various fields of adult learning.

The following questions were our starting point:

- What measures or tools are being used?
- How are learners described?
- What do the results of the various measures or tools say about learner progress?
- How is progress defined?

However, as we delved into the literature, our question base expanded to include these other questions as well:

- How is best practice for assessing learner progression described? What are the reasons for and implications of one practice being deemed better than another?
• What are the underlying theories about literacy and assessment? How do they influence the development and use of learner progression measures?
• How are these measures or tools used to make judgments about program quality?

We approached the selection and review of the literature critically, relying on the extensive and diverse experience of the project task force team, and guided by rigorous questioning, discussion, and analysis. To choose which documents to include in our review, we generated a list of key words with the help of our team and used them to search various databases. From the resulting collection of documents, we selected those we considered most likely to answer our questions. For example, we selected literature about progression measures as opposed to literature about initial assessment. As we moved forward, we found so many documents referencing the theoretical and policy contexts of progression measures that we began to include literature that focused on these issues as well.

Structure of the Report

In each section of this analysis of the literature, we use the Government of Alberta’s Living Literacy framework and the Alberta context as terms of reference. First, we examine the complexities of literacy and essential skills, which the literature makes clear. We look at the multiple interests and challenges surrounding LES programming and its purpose, and at the various perspectives about what literacy and essential skills are. We attempt to untangle the many – often competing – perspectives to paint as clear a picture as possible of what needs to be considered in learner progression measures. We then discuss culture and context in relation to adult literacy and essentials skills. Next we convey what the stakeholders in LES say about literacy essentials skills, learning, measures, and progress.

We examine what the literature says about who measures LES learner progress and why, and about precisely what is being measured. There is a range of measuring tools and approaches found in the literature, and at the great risk of oversimplification, we include a matrix of them. We then outline best practices in relation to measuring progress that were noted in the literature and we organize these in accordance with the Government of Alberta Living Literacy framework’s six values for literacy policies, programs, and services. We conclude with a graphic that we hope captures the complexity as well as the content of this literature review.

Limitations

As a look at the references reveals, this literature review is quite extensive: we reviewed 86 documents to generate the following analysis. That said, the review still has limitations. Although we used a wide lens to examine many measuring tools and perspectives on progress and learning, measuring and assessment, and literacy and essentials skills, our review was limited in scope. When time constraints forced us to bring our reading to an end, we were still
finding reports and articles of great interest. There are many left to read. We acknowledge that new research is constantly being undertaken, with new findings reported, and new perspectives brought to literacy and essential skills policy, programming, and measurement. We therefore agree with Campbell (2007b) who urges us to remember that ongoing research will always be necessary to inform and improve the LES system.

**Beginning with a Metaphor**

The authors of the literature we reviewed and the subjects they write about represent such a wide range of perspectives that it seems like a huge plain on which many people stand. Some stand on hillocks, others in slight depressions; some are fairly close to each other, others are scattered far apart. No matter what their position on the plain, every one of them is looking at the same point in the distance, trying to understand and identify it, and perhaps assuming everyone sees it in the same way. Because of the viewers’ relative positions on the plain, however, the point appears somewhat different to each of them. To add to the complexity of their perspectives, the point itself is constantly shifting, as is their relationship with each other in the changing landscape.

The plain we describe here is adult foundational learning, more commonly referred to as literacy and essential skills. The point everyone is looking at is how learner progress is measured. And the people trying to make sense of that point include:

- learners
- communities
- practitioners
- program administrators
- academics
- employers
- funders
- provincial governments
- federal governments
- international bodies such as UNESCO and the OECD.

Each of these groups of people sees the purpose of learner progression measures differently from the others — sometimes very differently. Their understandings and perspectives about literacy and essentials skills are diverse, sometimes complementary and sometimes contrary, but interrelated nonetheless. There are also divergent perspectives within each group. Some perspectives appear to wield more power than others. Some perspectives are barely visible. The multiple perspectives and experiences relate to each other as much as they do to their point of focus. All these perspectives reflect the shifting social and economic dynamics that frame the
value and currency of literacy and essential skills over time and place (Gadsby, Middleton, & Whitaker, 2007; Merrifield, Coleman, & McDonogh, 2001).

This metaphor of the plain reveals the complex interconnections between the many perspectives on and understandings of the meaning of LES and the purpose of measuring progress. We ask you to keep it in mind as you read through the literature review — measuring learner progress in LES is a diverse and changing landscape.

Why Measure Learner Progress?

When selecting measurement methods and tools for adult literacy and essential skills assessment, the first and most important step is to clarify your intention: why are you measuring? What kind of information do you want to collect? And what will you do with it once you have it (Crooks, et al., 2008; Fagan, 2007; Quigley, 2001)? Because there are many reasons to measure the progress of LES learners, it’s important to identify and organize them according to your intentions. Measuring methods and tools that identify and organize information for funding and organizational accountability requirements may be different from methods and tools that identify and organize information for learners, and may be different again for effective instruction. Such varied intentions, whether or not they are explicitly articulated, are central to any discussion of learner progression measures and the policy frameworks surrounding them (Derrick, Ecclestone & Merrifield, 2007; Lefebvre et al., 2006; Merrifield, 1999; St. Clair & Belzer, 2007; Vorhaus, 2000).

Measuring learner progress is only one reason for performance measurement in adult literacy and essentials skills (Merrifield, 1999; Salomon, 2010). Unlike measurements of the adult literacy skills of populations as a whole (Murray, 2005; OECD, 2011) and unlike measurements of program quality (Merrifield, 1999), learner progression measures assess the learning of individual adults in programs. Although interconnected with other aspects of measurement, such as population surveys and program quality standards in LES systems in Alberta and elsewhere, the focus of this review is primarily on learners making progress in a diversity of programs and settings, and how this progress is assessed.

Literacy in a Complex World

The title of this section is taken from Tracey Westell’s 2007 article of the same name because those few words so succinctly summarize the research we reviewed. There is complexity in every aspect of learner progression measurement, and there are multiple perspectives on every issue related to it. Most importantly, however, views on the meaning of literacy are varied and multifaceted. We found a spectrum of viewpoints on literacy and measures.
There are many stakeholders involved in selecting and implementing LES progression measures, and each brings a unique perspective to the process.

There are many reasons for measuring progress and many ways of using the results.

There are many perspectives about what components are necessary to make progress measurement valid and valuable.

Literacy itself is complex, as are the competencies and practices required for proficiency.

For ease of discussion we organize these complexities even though, by their very nature, complexities do not lend themselves to simplification. Rather, all aspects of literacy make up an interrelated and interdependent reality in which every piece affects and is affected by every other piece (Lefebvre et al., 2006; Merrifield et al., 2001; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities [MTCU], 2011). Isolating and examining the separate pieces of any complex system can give only an incomplete picture. It is therefore with this caveat that we proceed to separate the who from the why from the what of learner progression measures. We hope that the artificial separations in the discussion that follows allow the wisdom inherent in the diverging perspectives to be clear and useful.

When faced with many diverging points of view, it can be tempting to choose one and make it “right” because simplifying anything makes it easier to grasp. The problem, obviously, is that simplifying things can be counterproductive. No matter how much we might want to believe in a straightforward cause-and-effect paradigm, complexity theorists have shown us that the systems in which we live and work, whether ecological or bureaucratic, are complex, adaptive, and created out of multiple interactions among many participants (Westell, 2007; see also Derrick et al., 2007; Hayes, 2005; Lefebvre et al., 2006). Brigid Hayes (2005) warns about the risks of simplifying LES by saying that

Literacy and essential skills cannot be “sold” like Ivory soap — as a product that everyone must have. They are part of a complex set of requirements for individual, firm and national prosperity. They are also about being able to participate fully as a Canadian citizen. If we do not understand and respect that complexity, we take the risk of “overselling” the benefits of literacy. (p. 66)

One key aspect of the complexity surrounding learner progression measures is the sheer number of measurement tools available. Later we specify in some detail the measures discussed in the literature but before we examine the kinds of tools and approaches, we first look at how people understand literacy and essentials skills, and how they perceive adult basic education’s purpose.
Meanings of Adult Literacy and Essential Skills

There are literally dozens of definitions and descriptions of literacy in the literature. We are neither able to nor do we see the value in listing each definition here. Instead, it’s important to clarify the relationship between adult literacy and essentials skills because they are not the same thing. Most of the literature we reviewed presents adult literacy as a combination of skills and practices in relation to printed texts, situated in social contexts. The various meanings of literacy are framed by diverse and, at times, seemingly opposing theoretical frameworks, but all of them claim that literacy is about reading and writing — sometimes numeracy is also included or alongside. In the LES:LPM project, our exploration of progression measures acknowledges the complex social ways that literacy is understood, from the very specific to the very general, from identified skills such as reading, to larger contexts such as programming systems, policy frameworks, population surveys, and local cultural contexts.

Regarding essential skills, we acknowledge the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) description that situates essential skills within the workforce context. The HRSDC website notes that “essential skills…are used in every job and at different levels of complexity. They help people to find and get a job, as well as enable them to adapt and succeed in the workplace” (n.d.). HRSDC identifies nine essential skills: reading, writing, document use, numeracy, computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others, and continuous learning (HRSDC, n.d.). We found that much of the literature on essential skills presents them as workforce skills that can also be used in everyday life.

Based on our own exploration of progression measures, we agree that essential skills are located in social contexts both in and beyond the workforce. From the LES:LPM perspective, literacy is socially determined, complex, and diverse, and essentials skills are part of the broad diverse, and complex landscape of adult literacy (Barton, 2009; Hamilton, 2001; Harwood, 2012; Looney, 2008; Max Bell Foundation, 2006). Merging literacy with essential skills, however, can imply that they are similar or the same. Merging the terms in this way may reduce the meaning of literacy, which is broad and varies widely. By merging literacy with essential skills and therefore narrowing the meaning of literacy, the acronym “LES” can narrow the scope of measuring learner progression (Gardner, 2011a; Hamilton, 2009). Because we use the acronym throughout this review, we want to acknowledge that it has these implications.

The literature reflects the tension of melding literacy and essential skills, and we found that there are philosophical differences about the meaning of each separately as well as together. There are definitions that describe literacy as a discrete set of cognitive skills, which aligns literacy more closely with the concept of essential skills. There are other definitions of literacy that exceed essential skills to describe literacy as a social practice. We look here at what various authors say about the implications of seeing literacy in these ways.
**Discrete Set of Cognitive Skills**

When literacy is defined as a discrete set of skills, it tends to be connected to individualism, to economic competitiveness in a globalized economy, and thus to human capital outcomes in which one becomes literate for economic gains (Campbell, 2007b; Druine & Wildermeersch, 2000; George & Murray, 2012; Murray, 2005; Reder, 2011). This view has historical roots in cognitive testing of information-processing skills, with the key literacy skill being the ability to read both prose and documents (Murray, 2005; OECD, 2011). This perspective argues that, as a set of decontextualized skills, reading is not bound to a particular social context — that it can be learned, transferred, and applied in the same way in any social context (HRSDC, n.d.). Commercial standardized assessment and international surveys such as IALS and PIAAC, which were conducted by the OECD, are prominent examples of this way of viewing literacy. The HRSDC Essentials Skills Framework was also designed within this perspective (HRSDC, n.d.). It sees literacy, and most definitely essential skills, as a human capital commodity (Druine & Wildermeersch, 2000; Gadsby, et al., 2007). It views adult literacy education and training as building skills for individual economic gains and national economic competitiveness (George & Murray, 2012; Murray, 2005). Essential skills training programs are mostly designed from a human capital framework that foregrounds building knowledge and skills for economic outcomes as primary (Jackson, 2005).

Some researchers critique this perspective, arguing that standardized tools cannot capture real-life examples of literacy practices in everyday life, and may not demonstrate a learner’s existing knowledge and skills (Barton, 2009; Hamilton, 2001; Merrifield et al., 2001). Viewing literacy as primarily connected to the workplace can lead to teaching literacy and essential skills in a narrowed way that, while relevant to the workplace, may not provide students with sufficient ability to respond to the variety of challenges that adults face today (Druine & Wildermeersch, 2000).

**Social Practice**

Another way that literacy is described in the literature is as a social practice. This perspective views literacy as having multiple meanings because it is practised in relation to what people do with printed and electronic texts in their everyday lives (Barton, 2009; Gardner, 2011a; Reder, 2009). Literacy as social practice is concerned with how people engage with reading, writing, numeracy, and other forms of communication in social relationships and contexts (Campbell, 2007b). Literacy in this view is not a simple set of skills or cognitive attributes that someone has or does not have, but rather the activities that people carry out related to and shaped by all the (Barton, 2009; Hamilton, 2001; Merrifield et al., 2001). Viewing literacy as primarily connected to the workplace can lead to teaching literacy and essential skills in a narrowed way that, while relevant to the workplace, may not provide students with sufficient ability to respond to the variety of challenges that adults face today (Druine & Wildermeersch, 2000).

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1. OECD is the International Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which commissioned the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in the mid-1990s, and subsequent surveys such as Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), and Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).
other activities in their lives (Barton, 2009).

Viewed from this perspective, literacy is contextual, power related, and inherently social. This perspective is historically rooted in New Literacy Studies that emerged from ethnographic and anthropological studies in the 1980s (Barton, 2009; Hamilton, 2001). Viewed this way, literacy is always social, and therefore it is not only economic but also personal, political, and geographic. Literacy involves multiple skills that are embedded in the social purposes for which it is used (Campbell, 2007b; Connect Strategic Alliances, 2011; Druine & Wildermersch, 2000; Guadalupe & Cardoso, 2011; Hagston & Tout, 2007; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007).

This social-practice view applies to using literacy in all the domains of daily life: home, community, and workplace. Viewing literacy as a social practice in the workplace would examine how people use text as part of their work, and would link the use of text to social and structural relations, which include people’s skills, qualifications, performance, and communication (Black, 2012; Waterhouse & Virgona, 2005). Most adult literacy practitioners use a social-practices approach (Hamilton, 2009). Literacy as social practice connects learning with changes in learners’ self-esteem and confidence, social skills, self-identity, and self-determination, as well as with increases in reading, writing, and numeracy skills (Merrifield et al., 2001; Salomon, 2010; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007; Waterhouse & Virgona, 2005).

Barton (2009), Hamilton (2001), Reder (2009), and other New Literacy Studies scholars argue that test scores and skills descriptors are simply part of the social context, and that it is important to examine the meaning of any such scores or descriptors within a social context. This perspective also analyzes literacy as a tool of social ordering by looking at how current learning and education is tied to histories of both social class, such as the differences between private and public schools, and racist practices, such as those leading to Aboriginal residential schools (Cooper, 2006; Gardner, 2012; Hamilton, 2001; Quigley, 2011).

### Purposes of Adult Literacy and Essential Skills Education

Adult LES education has multiple and related purposes. For example, the Alberta Government’s *Living Literacy* policy framework (2009) states that the purpose of LES education for adults is to allow them “to pursue further job-related training and/or find a job and substantially improve their employment opportunities” (p.11). It also notes that the province-wide adult literacy education network that includes volunteer adult tutoring and family literacy programs is mandated to provide adults with learning for “personal, further learning, or employment purposes” (p.12).

While the literature notes various purposes of LES education, there is also debate and critique about how some purposes are privileged over others. Circelli, Curtis, and Perkins (2011) note that literacy and numeracy skills are necessary for greater workforce participation, productivity,
and social inclusion. On the other hand, Campbell (2007b), Hamilton (2001), and St. Clair and Belzer (2007) question why adult literacy education is increasingly directed toward the workforce and less and less toward civic participation and social inclusion. Debates about the purpose(s) of LES education and about the meaning of adult and literacy essential skills (as we described earlier) point to underlying theoretical perspectives that influence both how LES and LES education are viewed and how learner progress is measured. Before we discuss progression measures in more detail, it is therefore important to further explore the complexities of LES learning and daily life that are frequently noted in the literature. These issues include the perspective of LES as human or social capital; how LES fits within and influences social power relations; the influence of OECD international adult literacy surveys on how LES is viewed; and how adult LES learners are perceived. All of these issues are part of the complex world within which LES exists.

**Human and Social Capital**

The terms *human capital* and *social capital* were developed in other fields of study but they are used frequently in the literature we reviewed. The idea of human capital brings an economic value to knowledge and skills that individuals possess, and LES in this framework are most often discussed relative to business and the workplace. From a human capital perspective, literacy and essential skills are one and the same thing: labour skills for labour-market outcomes. This is the perspective that most policy-makers and organizations such as the OECD hold (Jackson, 2005). However, Giddings, Despins, and Maruca (2005) warn that a human capital view of people as resources for skills and knowledge risks becoming obsolete when there are changes to technology or organizations, or structural shifts in a sector. Workers with specialized skills and those with low levels of essential skills are most at risk.

By contrast, social capital views capacity from a social perspective. It involves social connections and understandings between people, and the shared norms and values that enable people to work together, live together, and learn from one another (NWT Literacy Council, 2011; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007). It looks at an individual’s level of confidence, the size and composition of an individual’s networks, the number of contacts the person has, and the level of trust they have (Centre for Literacy, Quebec, n.d.). From the perspective of social capital, relationships and networks are a resource that leads to a stronger sense of personal and social efficacy. The risk is that they can also become shackles when, for example, a newcomer is excluded from the group or when dominant group norms make a particular activity, such as education, “not for them” (Tett & MacLachlan, 2007).

Since the human capital perspective relates specifically to skills and knowledge, it’s easy to see how it relates to literacy and learning, but social capital also plays an important role. The literature provides several examples of this. Improved relationships between parents and children allow parents to support their children’s education more effectively (Tett & MacLachlan, 2007).
Social capital is needed to apply or transfer skills acquired in a learning situation to everyday use (NWT Literacy Council, 2011). When adults with little formal education were asked how they learn a new skill or find information, the most common strategy they reported was to ask someone for help (Lefebvre et al., 2006; Niks et al., 2003). Having the confidence and ability to engage socially is clearly essential for this strategy to work.

Applied to the workplace, the social capital approach considers the effective organization of the workplace itself — its culture, practices, and procedures, whether formal and explicit, or informal and tacit — as much as it considers the workers’ skills. It honours all aspects of learning. As Derrick (2012) says, “a key advantage of this model is that it has the potential to harness the power of informal learning and align it with the aims of the organization as a whole and its employees” (p. 27).

In most instances, the two perspectives are characterized as being opposed to one another. Derrick (2012) calls them “the two solitudes.” There is, however, a call to balance the two approaches (NWT Literacy Council, 2011; Salomon, 2010; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007). The Living Literacy framework (Government of Alberta, 2009) also aims to link human and social capital. For example, it defines literacy as having “personal, social and economic benefits for everyone” (p. 6). Thus in considering the purpose of measuring learner progress, it’s important to search for and note changes in both human and social capital.

IALS, PIAAC, Literacy, and Essential Skills

The discussion of the OECD-sponsored international adult literacy surveys such as IALS, ALL, and PIAAC was very prevalent in the literature. There were accolades for and critiques of these surveys. The survey results and measuring methods, which were to test participants’ information-processing skills, have gained extensive policy approval in Canada (Campbell, 2007b; Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2007a; Gardner, 2011b; Hamilton, 2009; Harwood, 2012; Jackson, 2005; Murray, 2005). In the literature, most authors use the acronym IALS, which refers to the International Adult Literacy Survey, the first survey, conducted in the mid-1990s. The results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey, the second survey, were reported in 2005, while the results of the latest survey, the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), were released in October 2013. Here in Canada many people eagerly anticipated PIAAC. It is described as a more comprehensive assessment of skills than the first two surveys because it promised to provide more detailed information on social outcomes in relation to LES (OECD, 2011). At least two international conferences on PIAAC took place in Canada (Centre for Literacy, Quebec, n.d.) in 2013.

Werquin (2012) argues that IALS was a pioneer, measuring outcomes on a large scale for the first time. It moved away from seeing educational attainment as a measure to what the OECD called direct measures of adult literacy skills. Thus it was not about how well one succeeded in
school but about how well one could use literacy in daily life. IALS focused specifically on prose and document reading and on numeracy, with test items that reflected everyday real-life reading and numeracy tasks (Brewerton, 2004; Murray, 2005). The OECD survey’s scale of proficiency and its definition of literacy were written into policies, and used for public awareness and to develop assessment resources for the field (George & Murray, 2012; Harwood, 2012; HRSDC, n.d.). This large-scale data source was viewed as a turning point in the adult literacy field at the same time as the concept of essentials skills for workforce literacy was emerging (CCL, 2007b; Murray, 2005, Jackson, 2005). IALS and now PIAAC have come to play a central role in the Canadian LES landscape as both measures of human capital and as a framework for LES education (Harwood, 2012).

In contrast to those who see this as a positive development and who applaud IALS for measuring real-life literacy skills, Reder (2011) cites critics who argue that, although the results of the survey are interpreted in terms of everyday literacy performance, IALS did not in fact measure how individuals perform in the context of actual everyday activities. Rather than seeing its influence on policy as a positive development, these critics argue that IALS is changing the discourse about literacy and learning: it is changing “the complex set of language, meanings and assumptions that shape our understanding and influence our actions” (Horsman cited in Norton, 2001, p. 6). In Canada and elsewhere, governments have increasingly turned to similar surveys to inform LES policy goals and measures. And yet IALS was never designed to measure learner progress in adult literacy programs — it measures the literacy rates of populations (Gardner, 2011a). St. Clair (2009) claims that the IALS constructs need to be approached with care:

Over the last fifteen years, the approach to measuring literacy originally developed for the International Adult Literacy Survey of the mid-1990s has grown into a system. It has been refined and developed in a responsible and interesting way by those involved in the various projects over the intervening years. However, IALS approaches literacy in a very specific way, and it is important to be aware of what this approach can be used for, and where it is more problematic.

(p. iii)

Merrifield and colleagues (2001) have a similar concern. They argue that IALS was built on a theoretical concept of information-processing skills which “fails to recognize the dynamic whole that we recognize as competence” (p. 9). They offer this example of what they mean about needing to recognize a dynamic whole. Packers in a dairy-processing plant had developed highly sophisticated methods to determine how to pack crates to meet particular orders, to the extent that they were doing extremely complex math in their heads. But when they were given pen-and-paper tests of the same concepts, they failed. That is, testing devoid from social context halts the use of local cues and practices that these people successfully used to perform the task in their workplace.
How Adult Learners Are Perceived by Others

To guide our reading of the literature, we wanted to see how learners are described by the various authors. This led to considering the role and standpoint of the viewer, whether as author or subject of a given article or report. These roles and standpoints included those of practitioner or instructor, test assessor, learner, and researcher. The way learners are perceived and described reveals underlying values and beliefs about adult literacy, LES education, learners, and adults with limited literacy.

In some of the literature that relied heavily on IALS data, the authors and/or researchers described learners in terms of their skills, test scores, and demographics (CCL, 2009; HRSDC, n.d.; Murray, 2005; OECD, 2011). These reports use a human capital view of learners, and focus on the proficiency or deficiency of skills. When describing the field of literacy and essential skills or the LES needs of a given population, other authors describe learners by bringing together the perspectives of both human and social capital, emphasizing skills, needs, and cultural considerations (CCL, 2009; Centre for Literacy, Quebec, n.d.; George & Murray, 2012; Harwood, 2012). Still other authors examine the outcomes and impacts of literacy learning and essential skills building from the standpoint of the learners themselves. This perspective tends to reflect social capital ideas and approaches literacy as a social practice (Barton, 2009; Battell, 2001; Cooper, 2006; George, 2008; Hamilton, 2009; Lefebvre et al., 2006; Norton, 2001; NWT Literacy Council, 2011; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007; Waterhouse & Virgona, 2005).

Our reading revealed how every aspect of selecting and using learner progression measures is influenced by the realities of power relationships (Druine & Wildermeersch, 2000; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007). Every stakeholder must negotiate power relationships: the learners and practitioners, the practitioners and program administrators, the administrators and funders, the funding ministries, and the government. Most authors who identified learners’ experiences of learning and assessment as important also discussed issues of power relations between learner and educator and within institutional systems (Hamilton, 2009; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007). When institutions value literacy as a standard set of skills, it’s at the expense of minority cultures, including Aboriginal peoples, who are expected to conform to the standards defined and measured by the dominant culture (Quigley, 2011).

Druine and Wildermeersch (2000) point out that the competencies a particular society deems important are not the result of a natural process but of a struggle that privileges some perspectives and erodes the value of other views. Certainly, even though there are many forms of knowledge and uses for literacy, the particular language of academics and the literacy taught in schools have a privileged position (Druine & Wildermeersch, 2000; Lefebvre et al., 2006; Quigley, 2001; Waterhouse & Virgona, 2005). Mirroring the rising popularity of the human capital concept, the focus on increased competitiveness and workforce skills has privileged training and measurement aimed at employment and educational qualifications (Grieve, 2007).
How others view adult learners makes a difference to their capacity to learn. A study by Niks, Allen, Davies, McRae, and Nonesuch (2003) showed that emotions, including how adult learners feel about how they’re treated, influence the learning strategies they select. If students perceive someone as unfriendly or judgmental, for example, they are less likely to use the very simple and successful strategy of asking for help.

Relevance of Context and Culture

Scholars, researchers, and participants in the literature repeatedly mention context and culture as crucial to the way learning and measurement are understood, engaged, and assessed (Barton, 2009; Battell, 2001; Cooper, 2006; George, 2008; Hamilton, 2009; Lefebvre et al., 2006; Norton, 2001; NWT Literacy Council, 2011; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007; Waterhouse & Virgona, 2005). Indeed, much of the literature insists that contexts are cultural and culture is context. Thus, across the LES landscape, economic, political, and geographical realities influence various social contexts at the local program level. The Living Literacy framework (Government of Alberta, 2009) acknowledges and values “the language, culture, spirituality and traditions of learner, families and communities” (p. 6). Derrick, Ecclestone, and Gawn (2008) see learning not only in a cultural context but also as a cultural practice itself. When looking for effective ways to measure learner progress, it is crucial that the complexities of local cultural contexts are considered.

There are many social variables — over which LES programs have little or no control — that work against or for learners’ success (Westell, 2007). These include everything from location and geography to the economy, and they affect or influence everything from enrollment and attendance to expectations of progress. Many researchers argue for the need to understand and acknowledge these kinds of contexts in which LES is learned, used, and measured (Brewerton, 2004; Campbell, 2007b; Centre for Literacy, Quebec, n.d.; Derrick, 2012; Faulk, 2011; Gill, 2008; Grieve, 2003; Guadalupe & Cardoso, 2011; Norton, 2001). For example, Grieve (2003) points out that many different types of literacy are used in particular contexts and purposes. There are particular places — home, school, work — where we use language in distinct ways based on the social relationships and expectations in each situation as well as on the context’s power dynamics. There should therefore be no assumption that LES demonstrated in one context will be exactly the same in another if those contexts are significantly different (Brewerton, 2004). Training applications should be customizable and flexible to respond effectively to the complexities of the particular social, geographical, and cultural context (CCL, 2007b; Centre for Literacy, Quebec, n.d.; Derrick, 2012). Crooks and colleagues (2008) in particular thoroughly discuss the situational differences that need to be considered and acknowledged so that programs are not treated as if their circumstances were identical.
In Alberta, the contexts for literacy and essential skills learning tend to be the community, postsecondary institutions, and the workplace. Provincially funded community-based programs in Alberta include both adult literacy and family literacy programs. These are often part-time programs with few paid staff and many volunteers. Postsecondary institutions offering literacy programs usually do so in the context of a classroom where a trained and paid teacher facilitates learning and assesses progress. The literature also distinguishes between workplace and workforce training situations. Workplace training usually means training that takes place at the work site; workforce training implies programs such as those focused on pre-employment or job-readiness skills, which are usually delivered outside the workplace.

Web-based learning in adult literacy, more than in essentials skills, is both a relatively new context for learning and a relevant one. According to the Living Literacy framework, one of the priorities for achieving the goal of increasing literacy in Alberta will be to “introduce new approaches to increase the numbers of adults participating in foundational literacy programs (levels 1 and 2) … including e-learning and web-based delivery” (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 7). In the literature we reviewed, we did not find much about measurement in e-learning situations other than the work of Johnston and Barker (2002), which focused on program assessment rather than learner progress. PIAAC, the most recent OECD survey, did aim to “directly assess adults’ abilities to solve problems in the context of technology-rich environments” (OECD, 2011, p. 6), but because cultural context for PIAAC is workplaces where workers’ jobs require them to use technology, its focus was primarily on the use of technology in the workplace.

Francophone Context

According to Crooks and colleagues (2008), francophone LES practitioners in Alberta find that the dominant anglophone cultural, social, and linguistic contexts in which they work influence program delivery and results. Their study showed, for instance, that a francophone practitioner might be the only program provider in a large area. If English is not her or his mother tongue, the documents s/he reads and produces may not be as comprehensible as they would be in French. It is extremely difficult for francophone learners to find accessible LES French-speaking programs.

Aboriginal Context

How Aboriginal communities approach learning is completely different from how the rest of Canadian culture approaches it. It is important across the many and diverse Aboriginal cultures that learning is supported by balancing mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being. Literacy practitioners working with Aboriginal learners therefore look for ways to honour all parts of the person (Cooper, 2006). The Canadian Council on Learning’s Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre proposes that a definition of learning success be developed in cooperation
with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people — a definition that more accurately captures the blend of qualitative and quantitative aspects that their cultures value (CCL, 2009). George (2008) argues that the most important way to view success in Aboriginal cultures is through learners making qualitative changes in their lives and learning their purpose in life.

The issues of Eurocentric education and literacy are fairly well documented in the literature (Howard, Edge, & Watt, 2012; Cooper, 2006; George, 2008; George & Murray, 2012; Henry & Grandel, 2011). Eurocentric values about print literacy need to be challenged to curtail the ongoing, racialized “measuring up” of Aboriginal people (Cooper, 2006). Conventional measurement tools, including large-scale assessments such as IALS, rarely reflect the specific needs of Aboriginal learners (Campbell, 2006; CCL, 2009; Crooks et al., 2008; George, 2008; Henry & Grandel, 2011).

What Stakeholders Say

Learners

Learners have many different reasons for attending literacy programs. Sometimes they seek recognized qualifications or want to receive accreditation (Hagston & Tout, 2007), while other times they are looking for personal fulfillment (Reisenberger, 2000). Rather than attending programs to develop skills oriented to the labour market to help them find a job or improve their career prospects, many learners speak about wanting to learn to read so that, for example, they can help their children with homework or read the newspaper (Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000). In fact, when they describe their progress, learners tend to talk about the changes in themselves and their activities in the broader context of everyday life more than they talk about the changes in their reading and writing skills per se (Grieve, 2007; Hagston & Tout, 2007; Hearne, 2011; Lefebvre, et al., 2006). Learners who don’t have academic goals may have difficulty seeing the connection between purely academic tasks and measurement tools and their personal reasons for wanting to develop their skills (Merrifield et al., 2001). And of course because learning is rarely linear, learners’ goals often change over time as a result of being engaged in a learning process (Grieve, 2007; Hayes, 2000; Lefebvre et al., 2006).

No matter what their motivation for attending a program, LES learners want a clear measurement of their progress. They have a great interest in monitoring and assessing their learning (Brooks, Heath, & Pollard, 2005; Crooks et al., 2008; Gadsby et al., 2007; Ontario MTCU, 2011). They both want and need to understand what they’ve achieved and what they still need to learn (Hagston & Tout, 2007). Merrifield and colleagues (2001) say that learners want to know — and also have the right to know — if they are making progress and what good quality work looks like. They also have the right to know how and why they are being assessed, to understand how “progress” is determined, and to have such judgments made consistently and in
relation to agreed-upon criteria (Gill, 2008; Merrifield et al., 2001). In fact, learners should be allowed to define the criteria by which their work is assessed (Lefebvre et al., 2006; Merrifield et al., 2001).

The challenge lies in balancing the learners’ needs for measures of progress with those of other stakeholders, particularly policy-makers (Derrick et al., 2007). If our goal is to increase the number of adults participating in foundational literacy programs (Government of Alberta, 2009), then the literature suggests we ought to always keep uppermost the needs that learners define, instead of deciding what is good for them (Lefebvre et al., 2006; Vorhaus, 2000). One of measurement’s uses should be to consult learners regularly about how well programs serve their needs (Looney, 2008).

Practitioners and Program Administrators

Practitioners

Of all LES stakeholders, those closest to the learners themselves are the practitioners who work with them day in and day out. It’s therefore not surprising that practitioners put such strong emphasis on using learner progression measures to support learning. They want to inform learners of their progress (Ontario MTCU, 2011) because they feel accountable to their students (Crooks et al., 2008; Merrifield, 1999). They use the information they gather to help identify needs based on learners’ abilities and the gaps in their learning, and to demonstrate achievement to support learners’ self-esteem and confidence (Hagston & Tout, 2007; Ontario MTCU, 2011). Practitioners need effective measures of learner progress to inform instruction and adapt their programs to learners’ needs (Crooks et al., 2008; Grieve, 2007). Especially when instruction aligns well with learner needs, they will be able to use the results of progression measurement for broader program planning and improvement purposes (Ontario MTCU, 2011).

The literature indicates that practitioners typically put their trust in qualitative indicators derived from practice (Salomon, 2010). Any measure that assesses progress primarily in terms of skills can miss the progress learners make in real-life contexts and in their personal development (Lefebvre et al., 2006). Most practitioners prefer measures that reflect their view of literacy as complex and changing, and perceive standardized tests with mandatory tasks as retrograde and unhelpful to learners (Hagston & Tout, 2007). They want measures of progress that support learner-centred learning, are user friendly, and meet the needs of a variety of learners (Connect Strategic Alliances, 2011; Merrifield et al., 2001).

The tools they use cannot be overly time consuming or financially draining. In fact, a crucial issue is the ease of accessing, collecting, and reporting information about progress in a way that’s flexible and can be readily integrated into the teaching process (Hagston & Tout, 2007). However, even if a particular measure of progress is difficult to administer, practitioners have
demonstrated their willingness to persevere with it when decisions about assessment remain with practitioners and are not imposed from outside (Hagston & Tout, 2007).

Practitioners understand that they are not solely accountable to their learners, and that learner progression measures are often used to satisfy multiple stakeholder requirements. Practitioners perceive their accountability as two-sided at the very least, to both learners and funders (Merrifield, 1999), but most said they had multiple accountabilities: to funders, taxpayers, learners, boards of directors, communities, and even the literacy field and their profession (Crooks et al., 2008). This is part of the issue’s complexity: measures of learner progress are clearly not only about learner progress — they are also used to measure program quality, effective use of taxpayer funds, and responsibility to the broader community.

Happily, such multiple accountabilities often overlap. The challenge for practitioners comes when their responsibilities to different stakeholders are at odds. Literacy programs are responsible to their learners and communities in different ways than they are accountable to funders. On the one hand they must provide a wide range of flexible services on an ongoing basis, and on the other they are responsible for effective and efficient use of funding (Crooks et al., 2008). The literature points clearly to the challenge of using measures of progress to accomplish so many disparate goals.

**Program Administrators**

Like practitioners, program administrators are also often caught between the need to report to funding bodies, their responsibilities to their communities, and their responsibilities to their practitioners and learners (Crooks et al., 2008). The progression measures they choose have to perform multiple functions in a way that’s streamlined and doesn’t demand too much practitioner time. The measures must also help them ensure practitioner competence and allow them to report learner outcomes to meet government requirements. In addition, they need measurement tools that will help them plan their work more effectively, determine how many learners are at what levels, and what kinds of resources they need to have on hand to meet learner needs (Merrifield et al., 2001). Any tension between these multiple functions is not necessarily the result of issues with measurement per se but may arise because, for whatever reason, programs accept funding that isn’t closely aligned with their instructional goals.

**Both Practitioners and Administrators**

While both practitioners and administrators understand and accept their need to be accountable, the literature indicates that there are some limits to this responsibility. LES programs are embedded in a complex system. People have issues with literacy and essential skills because of many factors far beyond LES programs’ power to change, including economic realities, family life, health, and individual differences. The number of adults whose literacy skills fall below
level 3 of the International Adult Literacy Survey is a social fact determined by these complex and interwoven factors (Westell, 2007). It is therefore an insurmountable challenge and completely unrealistic to call on LES programs, practitioners, and administrators to “unilaterally move those statistics [and thereby] to shift the burden onto a minor player in the system as a whole” (Westell, 2007, para. 4; see also Black, 2012).

**Employers**

The Government of Alberta takes education for the current and future economy very seriously. In fact, *Living Literacy*, the policy document coordinating efforts to improve literacy levels for Albertans, describes itself as a literacy framework “for Alberta’s next generation economy” (Government of Alberta, 2009). It focuses in part on what is necessary to prepare the workforce to meet the needs of that economy. It also highlights the importance of economic performance, both for society at large and the individuals within it:

> The impact of literacy skills on labour market outcomes is clear. Adults with higher literacy skills work more, experience less unemployment, earn more and rely less on employment insurance and social assistance. Where workplaces provided literacy and essential skills training for their employees, the results included improvements in safety records, worker confidence, productivity and performance, labour relations, quality of work, and increased staff retention (p. 5).

The literature similarly speaks to the need for a trained workforce. Canada is confronting demographic trends that indicate the supply of skilled workers will no longer come primarily from initial education; there simply are not enough newly trained young people to meet the need for skilled labour. Instead, it will be those already in the workforce who will have to learn new skills (CCL, 2007b). Workplace training is therefore crucial, and employers and governments know it. A significant challenge, however, is that employers are willing to provide workplace programs only when there is funding support available from government and when third parties provide support in designing and delivering the programs.

Any workplace training must be designed to recognize the complexity and uniqueness of the workplace involved. Derrick (2012) found that technical approaches to literacy learning assume that workplaces operate in mechanical and predictable ways. Instead, “the relationship between workplace learning, organizational and management culture, formal procedures and documents, worker engagement with learning, appraisal systems, productivity and efficiency is complex and specific for each workplace” (p. 30).

Employers need to know whether potential participants in workplace training will be able to manage program or job requirements (Ontario MTCU, 2011). The most serious barrier to skills
development is often incorrectly perceived to be a lack of literacy and essential skills when in fact it’s most often the “personal, psycho-social limitations on the capacities and orientations of workers as learners” (Salomon, 2010, p. 22). Therefore, echoing Amanda Hayes’s idea (2000), the most useful skills could be those of motivation and learning how to learn, skills that are often considered “soft skills” or “non-academic outcomes.”

Salomon (2010) shows that recent international and Canadian studies have documented significant learner outcomes in realms such as increased self-confidence, self-esteem, morale, and job satisfaction. These non-academic skills translate into significant changes in the workplace that employers can link to business success and an improved bottom line (Salomon, 2010). In fact, employers point out that in a knowledge society, people cannot use their hard-skill training effectively in the workplace unless they can also use essential but often disregarded non-academic skills such as communicating and relating to others (Brewerton, 2004). Employers are therefore very interested in having evaluations of workplace training incorporate measures that would capture such improvements in non-academic skills (Salomon, 2010).

Policy-makers

Across the literature there is consensus that learner progress measures are extremely important to policy-makers who focus on accountability, which is as multifaceted as practitioners’ call to accountability. Policy-makers consider themselves accountable to taxpayers to show their tax dollars are well spent (Merrifield, 1999); to other parts of government to demonstrate that programs are providing quality service (Ontario MTCU, 2011) and generating changes during a prescribed funding period (Hagston & Tout, 2007); and to learners, to ensure that, at the end of the day, they are successful and aware of it (Crooks et al., 2008). In short, policy-makers need to show a return on investment by demonstrating measurable and comparable results (Grieve, 2007).

Policy-makers’ need for measurable and comparable results means that LES must be seen as simple rather than complex (Guadalupe & Cardoso, 2011; Hagston & Tout, 2007). It must be reduced to a discrete and fixed set of cognitive skills (Campbell, 2007b) and policy-makers necessarily have to favour statistically reliable research (Salomon, 2010). While it’s understandable, this reductionist approach brings complications. Although skills are integral to literacy learning, they lose their meaning when pulled apart and looked at in discrete and de-contextualized ways (Ontario MTCU, 2011). The literature shows that policy-makers in the countries discussed here understand that they are faced with seemingly competing expectations. On one hand, they are required to demonstrate evidence of LES improvement that can be

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2 Several terms are used to describe non-academic outcomes, including nonformal or informal outcomes and soft outcomes. All of these refer to outcomes that are not identified through standardized testing. We are choosing to call them non-academic outcomes and intend that term to encompass the others.
compared across programs and systems. Proficiency testing is set up to provide these kind of data, though such data rarely show the desired results. On the other hand, policy-makers know that improvement in literacy practices, social capital, and non-academic outcomes are more readily reported by learners. However, this evidence is difficult to compile and compare.

Practitioners are concerned that statistical evidence provides only a fragmented picture of learner and program accomplishments (Crooks et al., 2008; Lefebvre et al., 2006). From the perspective of the learners, assessment has little meaning if there’s a mismatch between what’s measured and what learners want and value (Grieve, 2007).

In his longitudinal research Reder (2009) showed that programs actually do not have a short-term effect on learning gains, despite administrators’ focus on sometimes necessarily short-term measures. Rather than increases in literacy proficiencies, participation in programs leads to increased engagement in literacy practices. Such engagement in practice, in time, leads to gains in proficiency (Reder, 2009; see also Sheehan-Holt & Smith, 2000). This is not because programs are ineffective but is more likely because programs are best able to influence engagement in literacy practices rather than increase proficiency. This poses a critical dilemma for adult education programs and policy-makers alike when short-term increases in literacy proficiency are the measures used to assess program quality (Reder, 2009; 2011).

While proficiency measures are always likely to have a place in a policy framework, Reder (2011) suggests that we need additional measures that focus on practices so that assessment measures align more closely with the impact that programs really do have. Measures of practice used in conjunction with well-entrenched proficiency measures provide a richer qualitative framework for LES development (Reder, 2009).

**Bringing It Home to Alberta**

The *Living Literacy* framework (Government of Alberta, 2009) indicates that the government of Alberta is familiar with the conflict between the need for comparable results on the one hand and the need for measures that are meaningful to individual learners on the other. The framework’s first goal is to increase literacy. The first of that goal’s four priority actions is to “develop and implement an articulated adult literacy system referenced to international adult literacy and essential skills measures” (p. 7). Such a system, according to the framework document, would include standard learning outcomes and benchmarks, and learning and skills acquisition that would be assessed using standard tools (ibid., 2009). The whole purpose of such standardization is to try to ensure that identical practices are followed across a wide range of services regardless of differences between specific locations (St. Clair & Belzer, 2007).

The challenge for policy-makers in Alberta, however, comes in trying to reconcile the need for this simple standardization with other aspects of the framework that recognize the reality of
individual needs in the rich and wide variety of Albertan contexts. The framework’s stated values include being learner-centred and responsive to the strengths, abilities, and needs of individuals. For example, the third priority action of the goal to increase literacy is to identify new strategies that will provide a full continuum of training to effectively address “the specific needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people, immigrants, persons with disabilities and seniors” (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 7).

Reconciling these disparate needs may be difficult, if not impossible (Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000; St. Clair & Belzer, 2007; Quigley, 2001), but it’s nevertheless crucial to reconcile them (Grieve, 2007). Policy-makers are looking for a way of using measures of learner progress to achieve their policy objectives. Based on all we’ve read, this seems possible only if both outcomes and measures reflect the social values that underpin policy as well as the social realities of the contexts in which they are applied.

The Complexities of Measuring Progress

Tremendous Need for Clarity

We need to clarify our assumptions about the nature of literacy, how learning happens, and how knowledge is developed and applied (Merrifield et al., 2001). Such assumptions underlie all policy decisions, whether or not they are explicitly discussed as part of the policy formation, and will have a significant impact on how education gets delivered.

Developing any kind of accountability framework is more than a technical construction; its design is based on predominant values and beliefs about adult literacy, and what counts as skills, progress, and success. As Campbell (2007b) points out, what gets counted becomes what counts. Measuring methods and tools must fit with broader concerns and be chosen carefully with an understanding of systemic and social complexities — they cannot be approached as stand-alone mechanisms. Complicated by divergent values and perspectives on the purpose and measurement of adult literacy education, agreeing on a measure becomes all the more challenging (Gardner, 2011a). St. Clair and Belzer (2007) put it like this: “Only through a system-wide coherence in the way literacy and numeracy are thought about, practiced and measured can broad accountability and assessment approaches work as a mechanism for quality improvement rather than as punitive documentation procedures” (p. 199).

The Purpose of Assessment

When we are planning to assess learners, we should always start with asking why. The ultimate purpose of the assessment is the most important consideration in selecting and using measurement tools and in making the assessment results meaningful. In looking at this issue, we...
refer to an ongoing conversation in the literature about the purpose of assessment framed around assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning.

Campbell (2007b) tells us that assessment can be of learning or for learning. The primary purpose in assessment of learning is to provide evidence of students’ achievement. It is usually embedded in accountability systems and tends to privilege the needs of funders and policy-makers. It includes competency-based and standardized assessments. By contrast, the primary purpose of assessment for learning is to inform teaching and optimize learning. This approach aligns with formative assessment, which uses participatory processes in which students actively engage in tasks and dialogue to deepen their understanding of how they learn and what they know. Assessment for learning privileges the needs of students and educators, who strongly support it. It includes diagnostic and performance-based assessments. Campbell warns that any high-stakes assessment, such as those that funding decisions are based on, necessitates assessment of learning rather than for learning.

Torrance (2007) points out that we have now moved further along this assessment continuum, to assessment as learning. It is common today for assessment procedures and practices to dominate the learning experience. For example, when learners are coached to achieve a particular grade and have multiple chances to practise during assessment for learning, assessment procedures and practices come to completely dominate the learning experience. “Criteria compliance” thereby often replaces actual learning (Torrance, 2007, p. 282). A parallel concern involves the influence of narrow and firm targets on the learning experience. There is a risk — and in many instances it is a common practice — that teachers will feel pressured to merge teaching into assessment practices, which has come to be called “teaching to the test” (Derrick et al., 2007; Derrick et al., 2008).

Kinds of Assessment

Merrifield and colleagues (2001) define assessment very simply by explaining that it tells us how well someone can do something. It is usually focused on particular areas of learning and is time bound. Assessment tells us only what we ask about at a given point in time, and does not show us everything a person can do. The literature shows that there are many kinds of assessment:

- **Initial assessment** places learners appropriately and determines relevant learning material. It may be formal, informal, or standardized. In Campbell’s study (2006) of assessment tools and practices used in Canadian basic education programs, 80 per cent of practitioners reported that assessment’s purpose is to determine learner placement. Although there is a lot of literature about initial assessment, it did not meet our search criteria so we did not review it in detail. Because standardized assessment was mentioned
so frequently in the literature about learner progression, however, we do discuss it in the section on the range of assessment tools.

- **Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)** validates the learning that people have done in the past. It can help identify learner needs in achieving personal, professional, or academic goals; it fosters pride and self-esteem; and it helps learning be perceived as lifelong. It is supported in Canada by many educators and businesses and can play an important role in adult learner success (Salomon, 2009; see also NWT Literacy Council, 2011).

- **Formative or ongoing assessment** helps to manage the processes of teaching and learning during instruction (Merrifield et al., 2001). It also focuses on non-academic outcomes such as increased self-confidence, or increased involvement in children’s education or the community (Pinsent-Johnson, 2007; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007). Formative assessment tends to be context-specific with less consistency than a commercial diagnostic or standardized test.

- **Self-assessment by learners** requires both self-awareness and self-direction. Grieve (2004) reported that some learners rated themselves higher at the beginning of her study than half-way through it because they thought they knew more than they actually did. Self-assessment requires critical skills and self-awareness, and contributes to an understanding of how one learns (Lefebvre et al., 2006). Self-assessment can be viewed as a type of formative assessment.

- **Summative or final assessment** takes place at the end of a course of study, both to document performance and to judge the success of instruction. It is often formal and standardized and is a clear way to measure learner progress.

- **Assessment used for selection and accreditation** shows that learners have completed a course of study and reached a certain criterion of performance (Merrifield et al., 2001).

- **Assessment used for accountability** requires consistent and agreed-upon criteria and involves an evaluation of the program as a whole. It must allow for aggregation. Instead of all learners’ progress being assessed, a representative sample of learners suffices (Merrifield et al., 2001).

Of all the kinds of assessments listed, the literature mentioned two so frequently that we decided to focus on them further here: standardized and formative assessment. Both are used to measure learner progress.

**Standardized Assessment**

A very simple definition of standardized assessment is that tests are administered under standard conditions and the raw scores are given meaning by being compared to a norm sample or a particular criterion (Fagan, 2007). Examples of standardized tests are: the Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT), the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), and the General
Equivalency Diploma (GED) test. Standardized assessment is the preferred method of learner progress measurement in education institutions, industry, and government. It is commonly used for accreditation, as in the successful completion of certificate, diploma, and apprentice programs.

Although standardized testing as a form of measuring learner progress is now considered an integral part of many adult literacy and essential skills programs (Fagan, 2007), those who view literacy and learning as complex social practices often find standardized assessment measures, and the ways they are commonly used, to be intrinsically problematic. For example, Grieve (2007) calls on us to abandon the idea that assessment should primarily be standardized and its results viewed as objective truth. Guadalupe and Cardoso (2011) ask how, when local contexts vary so much, any standardized test can be expected to yield comparable result across individuals.

**Formative Assessment**

Formative assessment was also mentioned very frequently in the literature. It is an interactive approach to assessment involving both instructors and learners. It gathers information for making decisions about learners’ knowledge or skills to help meet learner needs and, by design, embeds ongoing assessment into the instructional process (Clark, 2012; Looney, 2008; Ontario MTCU, 2011). It provides quick results that can be used to help plan teaching right away and is best tied to a particular curriculum (Merrifield et al., 2001). Formative assessment puts the goal of student autonomy at the heart of the teaching process (Derrick, Ecclestone, & Gawn, 2009). “At its best, the process of tracking and recognizing progress helps to build learners’ skills for self-assessment and learning-to-learn” (Looney, 2008, p. 192). Many writers recommend formative assessment as the most appropriate way to measure progress in adult literacy programs (Derrick et al., 2009; Looney, 2008; Reisenberger, 2000; Vorhaus, 2000).

There are challenges associated with formative assessment. If the guidelines for using it are poorly designed or implemented, it will likely do little to advance learner autonomy (Looney, 2008). The capacity of programs can also be an issue. Practitioners need to be trained in activities such as demonstration, observation, feedback, and dialogue (Derrick et al., 2007).

**Progress Is Relative**

There are as many notions of success as there are purposes for literacy, and no simple way to define progress (Derrick et al., 2009; Finlay & Harrison, 1992; Merrifield, 1999). As we have seen elsewhere, key stakeholders have differing views on what counts as success and on how to measure it. At the system and policy level, governments have a legitimate concern in increasing the numbers of learners who earn certification (Looney, 2008). Employers perceive work
performance as the only assessment issue (Black, 2012). Because practitioners feel it’s necessary to adapt their programs to meet learners’ individual needs, which go beyond increasing literacy levels, they are concerned that such adaptations make learner progress difficult to measure (Crooks et al., 2008). And learners are often more likely to name their progress as increased self-confidence or autonomy, or as an increased ability to perform in real-life contexts, rather than earning a qualification of some kind (Looney, 2008).

A study that measured individual progression in Ireland showed that “progression is a subjective and context-specific construction that is extremely difficult to define, measure and capture through the conventional paradigm” (Hearne, 2011, p. 35). Although progression has been seen as linear and vertical for policy’s purposes, individual learners experience progress as much more non-linear, cyclical, and retrospective (Hearne, 2011). Hayes (2000) points out that, for some, maintenance is as important as progress, and sideways, unanticipated progress is also important to capture.

Progress in Workplace and Workforce Training

Grieve (2003) surveyed employers about skills they valued in their employees. She found that problem-solving, initiative, and the ability to work with others were valued as much as or more than reading, writing, and numeracy. Another study by Black (2012), which looked in detail at the role of literacy and numeracy practices in manufacturing companies, found that what mattered to employers was how well workers performed their jobs as part of a team. Echoing this finding is the 2004 study into key competencies and their associated implications for teaching and assessment, which focused on the OECD’s Defining and Selecting Key Competencies project (Brewerton, 2004). It showed that proficiency in both key and specific competencies should be inferred from performance — that is, from a real-life context — rather than measured as discrete and precise outcomes, and that the large variety of attributes underlying performance must be considered in any competency analysis because no single outcome is acceptable as an indicator of competence.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees expands workplace training outcomes even further (Larsen, 2008). It claims that for progress measurement of learners to be effective in workplace programs, they need to take into consideration:

- whether learners have met their goals;
- whether learning was meaningful;
- whether the workplace and employer benefited;
- whether the employer created and sustained literacy-rich jobs; and
- whether the community benefited from skilled and engaged citizens.
Non-academic and Social Outcomes

Non-academic outcomes are an important aspect of adult learning. They include factors such as self-confidence, self-worth, independence, agency, and the ability to handle challenges (NWT Literacy Council, 2011). They are the social learning that creates social capital. When we recognize learners’ emotional as well as cognitive changes, we emphasize their resilience and agency in bringing about changes for themselves, their families, and their communities (Tett & MacLachlan, 2007). Since people with more agency develop more varied and useful learning strategies, working with learners on increasing agency and self-worth is a useful educational strategy. Battell (2001) describes non-academic outcomes like this:

Students change their bearing, their walk; they hold their heads higher and smile more readily. They talk to their kids about school and homework. They look forward to reading or doing math, they read to their kids, they present ideas and speak up for themselves at home with spouses or parents, they are more ready to talk to school personnel and make phone calls to social workers. They report joining local organizations, going to the library, and having opinions on community matters. They may begin to plan for a career. They help each other and ask others for help in class. (p. 1)

In public policy, it’s usually taken for granted that only hard outcomes — as opposed to so-called soft, non-academic outcomes — are relevant and meaningful in measuring progress. The more subtle, intangible outcomes such as those in Battell’s description are largely ignored, compared to further education, training, or employment outcomes, which are more institutionally valued than personal development (Hearne, 2011). Recent studies, however, point to evidence that the softer essential skills, such as being able to communicate and work in teams, are as necessary for today’s economy as the more readily measured harder skills (CCL, 2007a). Brooks and his colleagues (2005) argue that it is necessary to incorporate softer skills and social outcomes, and Barton (2009) says that we need to find ways to measure these non-academic outcomes so that programs with those impacts are valued appropriately.

A NWT Literacy Council (2011) study of barriers to and factors that facilitate success found that adult literacy education influences success in three important areas. First, it influences the acquisition of skills, which include:

- academic skills such as reading and writing, math, and science;
- personal skills such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and commitment;
- practical skills such as reading to children and volunteering in the community;
- relationship skills such as better communication, strong family relations, and improved attitudes toward other students;
• skills for further education such as being more organized and having more experience; and
• skills for employment such as not being embarrassed to apply for a job and being better able to work with others.

Second, it influences attitude changes that include being more positive and having a better attitude toward learning and work. It helps learners overcome academic and attitudinal barriers resulting from negative prior educational experiences. And third, adult literacy education influences the behaviours that result from having increased skills and changed attitudes.

Range of Assessment Tools Found in the Literature

The following tables include a sample of the wide range of tools described in the literature. The tools are categorized as:

• diagnostic assessments
• standardized tests
• formative assessment measures
• practice-based, authentic, or practitioner-developed tools
• competency-based assessments.

Each category and tool is briefly described. The third column indicates the source or sources that mention the specific tool. We acknowledge that this information can be categorized in a number of different ways and that some tools can be placed in more than one category. For example, standardized tests can be used for learner placement as well as diagnostic assessment. While all of these tools were described in the literature we reviewed, there may also be many useful tools that exist outside the scope of this review.
Table 1. Diagnostic Assessment

**Diagnostic Assessment** (definition in Millar, 2007)

- is a series of tasks that reflect the reading, writing, or spelling process and allow the instructor to engage in an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the learner’s strategies, strengths, and weaknesses.

- ideally includes an interview; an informal reading inventory (IRI) or oral reading sample; a free writing sample; and word recognition, vocabulary, and spelling tests. (Note that many IRIs are constructed for children and are therefore not norm-referenced for adults).

- is particularly useful at intake because it provides information that can be used to plan and develop individualized learning programs or activities.

- is used by practitioners, instructors, and learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Cited by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA)</td>
<td>Can be used as initial assessment and to monitor ongoing progress; assesses learners working on tasks at lower levels (Sauve, 2012)</td>
<td>Campbell, 2006; Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bader Reading and Language Inventory (USA)</td>
<td>An example of an informal reading inventory</td>
<td>Millar, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laubach Way to Reading Diagnostic Inventory (USA)</td>
<td>Can be used with learners working on tasks at low levels; uses real-life activities</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger Placement Tool</td>
<td>This tool is designed to help the instructor or tutor choose the learner-appropriate book from the Challenger series.</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic Literacy Assessment for Beginning Readers</td>
<td>A standardized tool — a user-friendly assessment that is designed specifically to be used with adult beginning readers</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skillwise (UK)</td>
<td>Standardized tool that captures lower-level literacy skills; website has accompanying activities</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read Forward</td>
<td>Based on IALS: “focuses on feedback regarding assessment results and what strategies and learning need to take place to progress”</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario Skills Passport: Check-in Tool</td>
<td>Informally assesses essential skills and work habits</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2 **Standardized Tests** (definition in Millar, 2007; Fagan, 2007)

There are two types of standardized tests:

1) Norm-referenced in which, in order to have meaning, raw scores must be interpreted against the scores of others with similar demographic and social profiles (the norm sample). To make this possible, all learners must take the test in standard conditions.

2) Criterion-referenced in which, to overcome the criticism of test content not being relevant, an individual’s scores are compared to a content or skill in a particular curriculum area (the criterion) rather than to the scores of others.

- While the primary purpose is to provide information to facilitate placement in programs, standardized tests can also provide progress assessment and program evaluation functions.

- They sometimes provide general information regarding a student’s strengths and weaknesses, but more often they are rough measures for determining achievement levels in reading, writing, and math. These tests do not show how a student processes print and text or why a student has difficulty with word recognition or comprehension.

- They are reliable, easy to administer, and cost effective because they can be administered to large groups.

- Depending on the purpose for the test, standardized tests can be used by practitioners, learners, and policy-makers.
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<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Cited by</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT)</strong></td>
<td>Measures functional levels in math, reading, and language; can be used to determine readiness for literacy program, upgrading, and core skills development; developed for Canadian context in English and French.</td>
<td>Campbell, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) (USA)</strong></td>
<td>Assesses academic skills with many different levels of tests; available as paper or online test; can be used as diagnostic, formative, or summative evaluation</td>
<td>Campbell, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE)</strong></td>
<td>Measures functional abilities of adults; can be used in a variety of contexts, and accommodates the non-reader</td>
<td>Campbell, 2007b; Gill, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA)</strong></td>
<td>Valid and reliable; tests four essential skills. Practitioners must be trained to administer the tests. Training costs are involved.</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Equivalency Diploma (GED)</strong></td>
<td>Learners demonstrate high-school-level skills. Test fee is $100. Learners receive a GED certificate if they successfully pass all five tests.</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PDQ (Prose, Document, and Quantitative)</strong></td>
<td>An online assessment tool; provides information on skill using written and printed information on prose, document, and qualitative scales; can be used as diagnostic or summative tool; costs $12 per test.</td>
<td>Rahbari, n.d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Formative Assessment (definition in Clark, 2012; Derrick, Ecclestone, & Gawn, 2009)

- supports a learning environment that is neither daunting nor pressured, and is tolerant of failure, experimentation, and inhibition.
- is future-regarding, and includes thorough and insightful commentary on progress to date and on how, in light of that progress, a student might improve. Therefore, it is particularly useful in situations where adult learners need information about the standard of their work and about the next steps to take without being judged.
- is not prescriptive; there is no right way to measure.
- assumes that teaching and learning are iterative — always changing for learners and educators — that success must be measured by teachers and learners, and that it is relative, measured differently by different people.
- is used by instructors, tutors, and learners.

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<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations, investigations, conversations, exhibitions, in-take and exit assessments</td>
<td>Designed for a specific learning context; requires professional development for practitioners since designing instruments can be time consuming</td>
<td>Derrick, Ecclestone, &amp; Gawn, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catching Confidence (UK)</td>
<td>Self-assessment — captures the “soft skills” that support learning; tutor manual provides ideas for related strategies</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Tools for Learning in a Group Setting: Rubrics and Spinners</td>
<td>Monitors learning in context as well as in a group setting; a unique tool in this respect</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve Opened Up: Exploring Learner Perspectives on Progress</td>
<td>Helps learners pinpoint gains in learning; focuses on skills necessary for learning to occur</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Profile Self-</td>
<td>Helps learners understand the ways in which</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Tool (LPSAT)</td>
<td>they learn; designed for learners with learning challenges but adaptable for all learners</td>
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Table 4 Practice-Based Performance Assessment (definition by Pinsent-Johnson, 2007)

- evolved from a theoretical understanding of learning as a social process. Knowledge is seen to be formed by our active participation in various contexts, all of which include certain ways of doing, talking, thinking, and relating. Our understanding of the world is understood to be shaped by our ways of participating in it: whom we participate with, how we participate, the tools we use, and the role we have in the dynamics of power relationships.
- asks students to do something with their learning that reflects how new knowledge might be used in practice in a variety of contexts.
- is focused on collecting and demonstrating complex and cumulative knowledge, skills, and attitudes that reflect a student’s higher-order and critical thinking.
- is related directly to a student’s experiences and recent learning.
- is integrated seamlessly into learning and used to shape future learning.
- is dependent upon the learner’s active participation to establish goals and to choose appropriate assessment methods and performance criteria; is often a collaborative effort between student and teacher, student and other students, and student and people in the contexts in which the new literacy will be used.
- could prove to be a challenge to implement, depending on current accountability frameworks, reporting systems, and philosophies of literacy learning, though Pinsent-Johnson argues that it is ultimately more meaningful than either standardized or competency measures, and can have its place alongside other assessment approaches.
- is used by practitioners and learners.

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<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful Literacies Through Informal Learning Information Inventory</td>
<td>Assesses learners’ engagement, feeling, and values related to informal learning or learning that occurs outside the literacy program</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Informal Learning Matrix (WILM)</td>
<td>On-line, free self-assessment that provides learners with information about essential skills needed on the job, as well as what informal learning is needed</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The drive to competency-based education came from the vocational and workplace training sectors. Competency-based assessments are frequently developed as part of accountability frameworks.

Competencies, which refer to the skills and knowledge required to achieve a particular standard, outcome, or task, are usually set by a third party.

It is designed to provide learners with opportunities to demonstrate their abilities by completing contextualized tasks. This means learners have the opportunity not simply to show that they possess skills, but that they are capable of employing those skills to complete a task for a particular purpose within a particular context, such as an everyday activity (shopping) or a workforce activity (reading an incident report).

It tests learners within predefined areas that reflect programming content. Such tests may match program content competency for competency.

This style of assessment is strongest when connected to the content of a learning program, which is in turn strongest when connected to students’ goals.

It may be motivating to students who want confirmation that what they are learning is directly applicable to their goals.

It’s used by workplace instructors, practitioners, and policy-makers.

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<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS)</td>
<td>A competency-based assessment, its primary use is to measure a learner’s ability to interpret printed information in English from life-skills content areas in North American settings. The questions are in multiple-choice format, which makes it difficult to simulate real-life situations. Administrators and coordinators need comprehensive training sessions; they can then teach individual classroom teachers. The cost may be prohibitive for small programs — $11K minimum just for the program plus $25 per student (Gorman &amp; Ernst, 2004).</td>
<td>Geraci in Campbell, 2007a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Title</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Source(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Common Assessment of Basic Skills (CABS)</strong></td>
<td>Easy to administer; articulated to essential skills; can be used as diagnostic and for ongoing measure of progress (Sauve, 2012) Reliability is “questionable”; incomplete directions may result in inadequate sampling (Campbell, 2006)</td>
<td>Geraci, 2007; Sauve, 2012; Campbell, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES)</strong></td>
<td>Assesses three essential skills using questions based on workplace materials; can be used as a diagnostic tool to determine training needs (Harwood, 2012)</td>
<td>Geraci, 2007; Harwood, 2012; Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measure Up</strong></td>
<td>On-line or print-based essential-skills-focused tests; can prepare learners to take tests such as TOWES</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontario Skills Passport: Check-up Tool, Self-Assessment, and Facilitated Check-up Tool</strong></td>
<td>On-line; tests essential skills and work habits. The Facilitated Check-up Tool allows for questions to be read to the learner.</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recognizing Life’s Work: Leisure and Home-Based Activity Identifier Tool</strong></td>
<td>Recognizes skills used in hobbies and household activities that can be transferred to workplace</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FutureWorx: Employability Skills Assessment Tool</strong></td>
<td>Assesses employability skills but from both the practitioner and the learner perspective; designed to help track ongoing learning progress.</td>
<td>Sauve, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canadian Language Benchmarks</strong></td>
<td>These are a “template” to measure progress in speaking, reading, and writing English, with competencies as the template</td>
<td>Harwood, 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Non-Commercial Competency-Based Assessment Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring Tools for Learning in a Group Setting:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Individual Learner in a Group Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emerging Peer Tutor in a Group Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Group Process</td>
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**Developed within the context of community-based adult literacy programs in BC; a research-in-practice approach to outcome evaluation**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Adult Goal Process Chart Monitoring Tool</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Adult Goal Progress Chart</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Data Collection for Adult Goal Progress Chart</td>
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**The Adult Goal Progress Chart tool opens a dialogue with learners on the process of goal setting. The data collection tool monitors progress throughout the year. These tools were created for family literacy programs in the Fraser Valley, BC.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Gadsby, Middleton, &amp; Whitaker, 2007</th>
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<tr>
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Recommendations for Best Practice in Learner Progression Measures

The literature names many possibilities and recommendations for measuring learner progress in literacy programs. There are also descriptions of current and innovative literacy policies and practice in a number of different geographic and situational contexts. What follows is a synthesis of these best practice statements in the context of the six values named in the Government of Alberta’s *Living Literacy* framework, which state that literacy policies, programs, and services:

1. are learner-centred and responsive to the strengths, abilities, and needs of individuals.
2. acknowledge and value the language, culture, spirituality, and traditions of learners, families, and communities.
3. are delivered through collaborative partnerships. There are a number of examples of such collaborations.
4. support innovation and excellence in teaching and learning.
5. are based on shared responsibility and accountability.
6. are developed and implemented through open, honest, consistent, and transparent processes (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 6).

1. Learner-centred and responsive to the strengths, abilities, and needs of individuals

Approaches to Measuring Learner Progress

Hearne (2011) conducted a longitudinal single-case study of individual progression that was measured in the field of adult guidance from 2005 through 2009. She found that “the measurement of progression requires more broad-minded, bottom-up approaches that eliminate structures of domination and value democratic decision making” (p. 32). Hearne disputes the dominance of the positivist approach to determining the types of outcomes to be measured. That approach assumes that only hard outcomes are relevant and meaningful. More subtle outcomes such as personal development are largely ignored — just as they are in current measures of progress in literacy. She points out that longitudinal studies help us to deepen our understanding of the influences on, barriers to, and the nature of learner progression (p. 33). Hearne does not report on the costs of this type of measurement, though costs in teacher time are a key consideration here.

Several authors have written in broad terms about ways to approach learner progression measures. Having clear definitions of what is being measured and for what purpose are central issues (Merrifield, 2001). For example, Amanda Hayes (2000) discusses the need for clear definitions of learning outcomes, skill, and competence. She points out the need to produce robust evidence of achievement over time, and to identify outcomes sensitive to student needs.
Like Hearne, Hayes emphasizes the importance of identifying “softer” outcomes and how they align with government priorities, such as economic success and social cohesion.

Campbell (2006) surveyed Canadian literacy educators and collected data on assessment practices. She makes several recommendations. First, the development of new tools to assess adult literacy and basic education is necessary, preferably with the guidance of a “national committee to determine standards for test development” (p. 63). These new tools should be user-friendly, culturally relevant, and diagnostic. Educators would further benefit from an on-line assessment database that would enable them to choose the most appropriate assessment tools for their learners. Also, assessment needs to be tiered to learner competency levels; learners who are emergent readers and writers should not be subjected to standardized tests as an initial assessment of their abilities. Finally, assessment should be placed prominently in professional development systems funded by governments, and professional development in assessment needs to be an ongoing commitment.

**Literacy Practices**

The Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) followed a selected group of adults for nine years, tracking literacy abilities, patterns of participation in literacy training and education, and life experiences associated with literacy development (Reder, 2009). Adults were assessed using the Document Literacy scale of the Test of Applied Literacy Skills (TALS), which is a test constructed in the same framework as tests like IALS and PIAAC. Adults were also assessed over the span of the study through personal interviews. Key findings indicate that, for most adults, literacy continues to develop throughout adult life and that a majority of the adults in the study engaged in self-study. The most interesting finding from LSAL is that there seems to be no relationship between proficiency change and participation in adult basic skills programs. In contrast, the data show a strong positive relationship between participation in programs and literacy practices. The author makes a case for measuring literacy practices rather than proficiencies and for developing a list of criteria for this purpose.

Crooks and colleagues (2008), writing on the state of accountability in the adult literacy field in Canada, conducted a field study that interviewed 136 practitioners and funders. Feedback came from every province and territory. Recommendations from that study relating to adult learner progress included tracking learner progress with long-term goals in mind, and developing reporting tools that “tell the adult literacy story” (p. 28) and take into consideration the complexity of adult learners’ lives.

**Non-academic Outcomes and Non-formal Learning**

Battell (2001) found that measures of non-academic outcomes need to be developed and field-tested and that self-reflection is one, if not the most important, way of measuring non-academic
outcomes. Other researchers echo the importance of recognizing and measuring non-academic outcomes (Brooks et al., 2005; Barton, 2009). Such outcomes are especially significant to Aboriginal learners who place high importance on the emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of learning (George, 2008).

The OECD similarly suggests that there’s value in “widening the range of literacy benchmarks: extending the range of educational achievement measures to take into account aspects such as health and civic literacy” (OECD, 2007, p. 15). With this in mind, noncredit learning outcomes need to be identified, recorded, and valued. These outcomes are both more difficult to verify and “more numerous and varied than we think” (Hayes, 2000). Identifying softer outcomes and how they align with government priorities, such as economic success and social cohesion (Hayes, 2000), is key to being learner-centred and responsive to the strengths, abilities, and needs of individuals.

2. Acknowledge and value the language, culture, spirituality, and traditions of learners, families, and communities

Aboriginal Literacy

The Living Literacy framework acknowledges “the importance of literacy actions taking into account the cultures and realities of communities, and circumstances of populations such as First Nations, Métis and Inuit, new immigrants, persons with disabilities and seniors” (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 1). In relation to First Nations people, we found the literature recognizes culturally relevant literacy measurement as transformative.

When education is based on and experienced in one’s culture, it has the potential to be a transformative event … The idea of putting culture at the centre of the learning process ensures that a learner can truly know her or himself as an Indigenous person, with a deep and wide history, with a relevant and rich present and with a promising future. (Cooper, 2006, p. 10)

Aboriginal educators have noticed success when using culturally relevant programming that meets community needs. Funding for these programs is not often available but, according to George (2008), it should be. Assessment tools should be developed that respect culture and geography (Crooks et al., 2008).

Family Literacy

Little recent literature describes assessment tools and practices used exclusively in family literacy programs. When such assessment is described, researchers recommend a holistic view. Literacy BC developed a framework of standards for family literacy programs in which
practitioners are encouraged to use a variety of assessment tools, keeping the needs of the learner foremost. As part of an evaluation of a family literacy program, Rahbari (n.d.) used a commercial tool (PDQ) and pre- and postprogram questionnaires to assess the benefits of the family literacy program on the parents’ reading as well as on their parenting skills.

3. Delivered through collaborative partnerships

Support partnership building

A good example of partnership building is Scotland’s system for national assessment and accountability in adult literacy and numeracy, which is managed through partnerships with 32 local authorities. Learning Connections, part of the Scottish government staffed by experienced literacy practitioners, provides support and resources to these partnerships. It encourages the local authorities to try initiatives that align with government priorities, and to see how those priorities align with local needs (St. Clair & Belzer, 2007). In Australia, federal and state governments collaborate to create a national system of measures for vocational education and training (Hagston & Tout, 2007).

Closer to home, as a collaborative project between the Centre for Literacy, Workplace Education Manitoba, and the Nova Scotia Labour and Workforce Development, the Measures of Success project illustrates positive ways to initiate and foster these types of partnerships. Over the course of the project, learners, program coordinators, instructors, and employers were consulted. According to the evaluation results, which measured longer-term outcomes six months following training, literacy and essential skills gains appear across a broad spectrum of outcomes, both qualitative and quantitative.

For effective measurement in the workplace, Larsen (2008) argues that one needs to determine whether:

- Learners met their goals.
- Learning was meaningful.
- The workplace and employer benefited.
- The employer created and sustained literacy-rich jobs.
- The community benefited from engaged and skilled citizens.

4. Support innovation and excellence in teaching and learning

Diversity in Practices

Bringing together a diversity of assessment practices is crucial to the learning process. To respond to the diversity of learners and programs, practitioners need to pursue ongoing
professional development to build their skill in teaching and fostering learning. Although their study focused on children, Johnston and Costello (2009) posit that

If literacy assessment is to serve literacy learners and society, then it has to be grounded in processes that reflect current understandings of learning, literacy and society. It also has to remain open to evolution in both literacy and assessment, which at the very least means encouraging some diversity in assessment practice. (p. 158)

Grieve (2007) concurs and suggests that policy-makers consider encouraging the use of a variety of assessments designed to show “particular aspects of learning, and individual and social impacts” (p. 152).

**Cognitive Processes Model**

In British Columbia, Gadsby and her colleagues (2007) have created literacy benchmarks for community literacy programs based on a cognitive process model, in which the learner masters the cognitive processes that underpin literacy, such as analyzing and integrating. They’ve developed benchmarks in six domains and recommend that these be integrated with assessment in K-12 and postsecondary sectors. Innovation and excellence in programs means expanding our understanding of what constitutes program success.

**Consider Learner Outcomes**

Program funding should not be exclusively tied to learner outputs. Learner progress may be more a reflection of the conditions within which the program or learner is operating than indicators of program quality (Crooks et al., 2008). When funding is tied to assessment results, there is a risk of unintended consequences, for example, selecting learners for a program who are the most likely to succeed (Grieve, 2007). Also, the number of learners in a literacy and essential skills program is not an indicator of program quality (Crooks et al., 2008). As Vorhaus (2000) puts it, “evidence of retention and attendance is largely irrelevant as evidence of learning” (p. 25).

**Respect Learner Dignity**

When it came to effective practices in assessment, practitioners in one study highly rated a system of assessment that safeguarded the dignity and privacy of the learner. One practitioner said, “I think the most critical issue is that we need to value the students and not place them in assessment situations where they are at risk of suffering humiliation” (Campbell, 2007a, p. 225).
Develop Assessment Tools Based on Learner Strengths

There is a call in the literature for developing reading and writing assessment tools that look at what people can do, not at their weaknesses. We still need a framework for letting learners see and record the progress they are making (Brooks, Heath, & Pollard, 2005). While practitioners tend to use strengths-based approaches for informal and formative assessment of learner progress, there are limited acceptable reporting mechanisms in current accountability systems. Moving from seeing this evidence as merely anecdotal to seeing it as valid and valuable can bring about changes in reporting systems.

Design Appropriate and Ongoing Professional Development

Program excellence is tied to professional development, training, and support for practitioners. We need to accept practitioners’ judgment of learner progress (Campbell, 2007a). Everyone seems to agree that professional development is critical to the provision of appropriate, culturally relevant assessment, with recommendations that ongoing professional development should be provided to all those involved in the assessment of learners. In community literacy programs, this will include tutors and practitioners (Gadsby et al., 2007; Campbell, 2006).

Consider Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is rooted in a constructivist view of learning that requires students’ deep involvement and engagement. This means that practitioners are not just giving feedback but engaging in a dialogue about learning. According to Derrick, Ecclestone, and Merrifield (2007) the ten best practices in formative assessment are to:

1. make it part of effective planning for teaching and learning, which should include processes for feedback and engaging learners;
2. focus on how students learn;
3. help students become aware of how they are learning, not just what they are learning;
4. recognize it as central to classroom practice;
5. regard it as a key professional skill for teachers;
6. take account of the importance of learner motivation by emphasizing progress and achievement rather than failure;
7. promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria being assessed;
8. enable learners to receive constructive feedback about how to improve;
9. develop learners’ capacity for self-assessment so that they become reflective and self-managing;
10. recognize the full range of achievement of all learners.
5. Shared responsibility and accountability

**Mutually Accountable**

Progress measures, and all assessments, have accountability as their main focus, but there is little acknowledgement in such accountability systems of the various stakeholders and their multiple intentions, expectations, and responsibilities. Because there is currently no common model of shared or mutual accountability, learner progress tends to be the default benchmark not only for learner success but also for program success. Because formative assessment is a practice of shared responsibility, lessons could be learned from this relationship between learner and practitioner for the broader LES system.

An environmental scan of the literacy and essential skills field in Canada, conducted by Harwood for the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network in 2012, included a focus group of adults from across the country who had participated in literacy and essential skills programs. This group strongly recommended that learners have a voice in the development of literacy and essential skills programming. Learners are interested in making programs more responsive, more accessible, and of a consistently high quality.

Learners believe that all key stakeholders, including government, business, labour, educators, and learners, should contribute to the creation of a “Canadian Literacy and Essential Skills system that meets adult education principles and supports workers to gain skills and knowledge for the ever-advancing demands of the economy and society” (Harwood, 2012).

6. Develop and implement policies, programs, and services through open, honest, consistent, and transparent processes

**Collaborate and learn together**

As an example of this value in action, the Government of Alberta’s *Living Literacy* framework was developed in response to recommendations from literacy practitioners, organizations, and other stakeholders. There is little evidence, however, of existing literacy frameworks in Alberta that were developed through “open, honest, consistent, and transparent processes.”

Some literacy frameworks include a broad spectrum of stakeholders and partnerships, which are key to the success of various initiatives. For example, the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) is a mechanism for reporting on adult skills in English language, literacy, and numeracy with applications for a wide variety of contexts. A number of key stakeholders and practitioners from across Australia contributed to that framework’s development (Hagston & Tout, 2007).
Westell (2007) advocates for the creation of literacy policies that are “more flexible and responsive, more democratic and more innovative” (p. 4). She recommends that we:

- Do not tie simple outcomes to a complex system.
- Acknowledge and encourage (rather than silence) the natural feedback loops in the system. This relates to how important it is to encourage dialogue among learners, practitioners, bureaucrats, and politicians.
- Do not tie funding solely to literacy performance.
- Encourage innovation. Unfortunately, practitioners have no time to consider innovative practices, says Westell, because they are busy spending their time on current funding and administrative practices.
- Strengthen the infrastructure of the field. Westell asks, “What would happen if, as an experiment in policy development, government allowed the field to structure and monitor itself with help from government in terms of field development, guiding principles (developed with the field but partially monitored by government field workers) and financial accountability guidelines?” (2007, p. 6).
- Find meaningful ways to document adult literacy: “Some things are not measureable and perhaps these are the most important things” (p. 6).

St. Clair writes about systemic considerations in accountability in Canadian adult literacy programs. Here are his four main recommendations:

1. Clearly state expected outcomes for adult literacy programs.
2. Create an accountability framework — the lack of a current accountability framework puts adult literacy programs at risk.
3. Any accountability system must include the wisdom and values of practitioners in the field.
4. Any effective accountability system has resource costs. (2009, pp. ii-iii)

St. Clair also advocates for a differentiation in outputs versus outcomes. It is important not to hold people accountable for things they do not have the power to change. For literacy programs, for example, this might mean whether or not a learner becomes employed. St. Clair argues that accountability systems need both “looseness” and “tightness” — that is, there are some parts of a system that need to be clearly articulated and other parts that may be less important to frame tightly.
Conclusion: Image of Complexities

In this investigation into learner progression measures, we came to understand that the issue’s components are complex and interrelated. The following graphics represent these components as spheres that overlap, intersect, and generally bump up against each other. The larger spheres represent stakeholders, the issues surrounding exactly what is being measured, the different kinds of measurement tools, and the recommendations from best practices. Smaller spheres show the themes related to each component, and are linked to their particular component by colour. There are two figures below: one has each of the four issues and related components separately (see Figure 1), and the second all the issues presented together (Figure 2). We hope this conveys the layers of complexities within each issue as well as among all issues in measuring and assessing learner progress.
Figure 1.

What tools exist?
- Formative assessment
- Performance-based assessment
- Standardized assessment
- Competency-based assessment

What are best practices for measuring learner progress?
- Share responsibility, accountability
- Respond to individual needs
- Develop partnerships
- Support excellence, innovation
- Be open, honest in developing policy

Who measures learner progress?
- Practitioners
- Policy makers
- Employers
- Program managers
- Adult learners
What the graphic can’t represent is the degree to which learner progression measures typically have a linear idea of progress. The research clearly shows that literacy learning doesn’t follow a linear path but is a much messier, more complicated, and sometimes invisible process. In fact that invisible aspect may be the most important part of the process, though it’s also the most challenging to document. Literacy changes how learners feel about themselves in the world. However, confidence, authority, and a profound shift in one’s relationship to text are all difficult to measure. Learners often speak about important but subtle life changes as their literacy strengthens — changes that aren’t testable skills. As Amanda Hayes (2000) reminds us, the most useful skills in the end might be motivation and learning how to learn, skills that are often considered “soft skills” or “non-academic outcomes.” Sometimes learners also experience dramatic changes but whether their stories are dramatic or quiet, they tend to be dismissed as “mere” anecdotes.

Research that values the quantifiable cannot accommodate self-reports but self-reports are at the heart of adult literacy learning. We know that because existing assessment tools are
proficiency-based, their value is limited. We know that it’s highly problematic to represent the messy and mysterious changes that are literacy learning as linear progress. As stakeholders search for a balanced set of measures, we need to question the assumption that self-reports are skewed evidence. Ample research indicates that numbers can only ever tell the story that researchers are looking for. The full picture of literacy and essential skills learning has to include and value as evidence the unique and personal narratives of those it is supposed to serve.
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