



Adult Education Pays... For An Informed Citizenry

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) released results from the Survey of Adult Skills in October 2013. On November 13, 2013, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released *Time for the US to Reskill? What the [PIAAC] Survey of Adult Skills Says*.ⁱ PIAAC surveyed approximately 5,000 adults ages 16 to 65 in the USA and 23 other participating countries. The survey assessed literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments.ⁱⁱ

Commenting on the initial release of the PIAAC findings, OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría wrote, *“In all countries, adults with lower literacy proficiency are far more likely than those with better literacy skills to... perceive themselves as objects rather than actors in political processes.... In other words, we can’t develop fair and inclusive policies and engage with all citizens if a lack of proficiency in basic skills prevents people from fully participating in society.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

In *Time for the US to Reskill?* OECD Secretary Gurría introduced PIAAC findings by stating, *“The good news is that there are very few countries in the world that are able to make better use of their citizens’ skills than the United States.”*^{iv}

This U.S. PIAAC report found that basic skills matter for effective citizenship. “In the U.S., even more than in most other countries, those with lower skills are more likely to feel that they lack influence on public decisions (60% of low-skilled adults do not believe that “people like them” have a say in what the government does).”^v

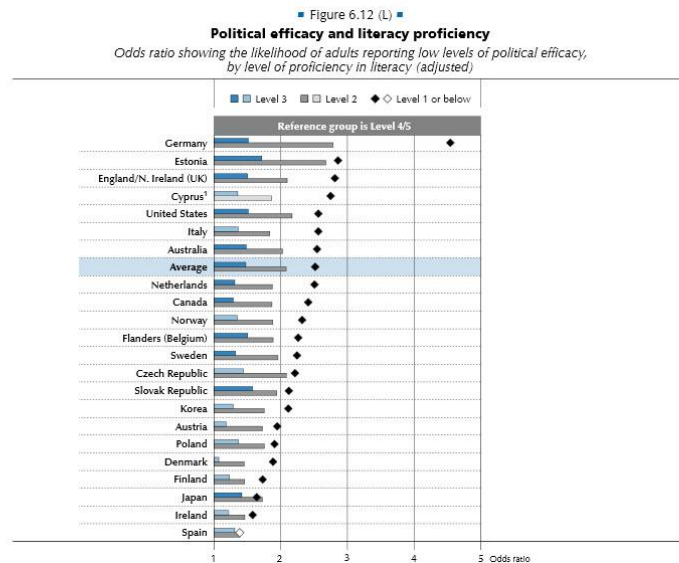
In PIAAC, Literacy was defined as *“understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”*^{vi}

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, in a segment on the importance of an educated citizenry in its state-by-state description of adult learning, offered, “Achieving the ‘American Dream’ is a historic driver of citizen behavior in the U.S. It has been a deeply-held article of faith among native-born Americans, and it has been a significant motivator for many generations of immigrants. The ideal of the ‘American Dream’ is composed of many elements, but is centered on the notion of ‘opportunity’ in both social and economic terms. These opportunities are closely tied to individual educational attainment.”^{vii}

One component of the “American Dream” is “political—that citizens have the right and obligation to serve as active members of a functioning democracy at the local, state, and national levels. Evidence is strong that participation in civic life varies by educational level. For example, one study found that 79 percent of persons aged 25–44 with a bachelor’s degree voted in presidential elections compared to 67 percent of those with some college, 50 percent of high school graduates, and 27 percent of those with less than a high school education.”^{viii}

“The launch of the OECD Survey of Adults Skills (PIAAC) results should be seen as a wake-up call for action for policy and decision makers”, wrote Motschilnig. A component of “democracy and citizenship is ‘political efficacy’, i.e. the belief of individuals that they have an influence on their surroundings – the belief, in short, that they can make a difference” (see figure below). “Certain abilities may make people feel more powerful by instilling a sense of control and making people feel that they can make a difference.

In particular literacy skills are needed to understand political issues as most of the sources of information are text-based.” In the USA, the likelihood of adults at level 1 or below in literacy perceiving low levels of political efficacy was approximately two and a half times greater than at the highest levels of literacy.^{ix}



Findings from PIAAC indicate that “high skills proficiency levels can promote social cohesion and strengthen citizenship, and can deepen social networks... Therefore there is a call for an increased awareness of the wider benefits of lifelong learning, which ... extend to social and individual benefits, such [as]... active citizenship. Participating in learning activities and increasing skills can... end up being an important tool for empowerment”^x

In *Time for the US to Reskill?* OECD recommended that the USA needs an approach that “goes beyond simply responding to expressed demand [for instruction], but emphasizes the need to reach out to those who may have weak skills, to raise awareness of the issues, and the scope for individuals to improve their skills through learning initiatives.”^{xi}

OECD’s *Skilled for Life?* report on PIAAC concludes, “Emphasizing fairness and integrity in policy development and implementation, ensuring that policy making is more inclusive, and building real engagement with citizens *all involve citizens’ skills*... The survey results offer vital insights for policy makers working to tackle the challenges involved in developing skills, activating the supply of skills, and putting skills to more effective use so as to achieve better outcomes for individuals and societies.”^{xii}

ⁱ http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/time-for-the-u-s-to-reskill_9789264204904-en

ⁱⁱ <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/publications.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría, October 8, 2013, <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/launch-of-oecd-survey-of-adult-skills.htm>

^{iv} *Time for the US to Reskill?*, p. 3 http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/time-for-the-u-s-to-reskill_9789264204904-en

^v *Ibid*, p. 24.

^{vi} http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/literacy-numeracy-and-problem-solving-in-technology-rich-environments_9789264128859-en

^{vii} NCHEMS, 2008, p. 12, <http://www.nchems.org/pubs/docs/Adult%20Learning%20in%20Focus.pdf>

^{viii} *Ibid*, p. 16.

^{ix} Lifelong Learning in Europe, 2014, <http://www.liline.fi/en/article/advocacy/812014/active-citizenship-and-non-work-related-aspects-of-piaac>

^x *Ibid*.

^{xi} *Time for the US to Reskill?*, p. 52.

^{xii} OECD, 2013, p. 7, http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/SkillsOutlook_2013_ebook.pdf