

Literacy and lifeskills in Australia: implications for policy activism

Sue Shore, University of South Australia

Jean Searle, Griffith University

Abstract

This paper explores data collected for the *Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS)* – the Australian component of which was released in late 2007. Our interest is in exploring the opportunities for policy and practice that arise as a result of comparing two substantial data sets spanning the decade 1996–2007. We begin by (briefly) outlining the background to the larger survey project coordinated by the OECD/Statistics Canada, which provided the framework and verification processes for Australian data collection. Then we provide some analysis of Australian data with the intention of relating literacy and numeracy to a range of demographic and socio-economic variables. Rather than a description of what was measured and what was found, our primary focus is to engage in critical dialogue with aspects of the findings and lay a framework for some comparative exercises. We hope this will provide VET practitioners and researchers with a preliminary framework for making better use of the findings within organisations, professional and political networks and local communities.

Some background to measuring literacy

Since the end of World War 2 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has aimed to quantify, explain and remedy the problem of 'illiteracy'. Initially seen as 'developmental', the early UNESCO and World Bank literacy programs were based on the premise that a literate population would increase productivity and hence the economic development of the country. UNESCO campaigns were shaped by an 'autonomous' model of literacy (Street, 1984) that is, a narrow, culture specific literacy practice which assumes uni-dimensional and linear progress towards 'civilised society' and more recently for 'economic take-off'. This view of literacy presumes that the skills of reading, writing and enumerating are context free, universal in and across time and space, and shape individual and social progress—in other words they are generic skills. In the last 35 years or so, substantial changes have taken place in world economies, so much so that the education-economic productivity dynamic takes precedence in most education and training documents as the best, indeed the only, way in which progress can be imagined. From this basis correlations are made between national productivity and skills strengths and deficits. Literacy and numeracy are central to these claims.

Two surveys, the *International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)* (reported in Australia as the *Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL)* Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997) and the *Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS)* have gained some visibility in recent times as governments wrestle with an emerging culture of national markets nested in global economies. For those in the language and literacy field the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides support for these economic arguments via long term projects which develop comparative indicators on education and training (OECD & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997; OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995, 2000; Statistics Canada & OECD, 2005). These surveys extend the economic take-off model and seek to test the operational merit of the education-economic

productivity equation by developing measures of population proficiency on a number of dimensions over decades.

In this paper we undertake a preliminary analysis of the findings of two large-scale surveys of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills across a number of countries. Given the recent release and 'in process' stages of analysis of Australian results, we use this paper as an opportunity to ask probing questions about what we can know of Australian literacy practices based on the comparative indicators approach, what the analyses might tell us about contemporary Australian practices, and what we need to know as researchers and policy makers if we are to engage in an informed way with the results.

Associated literature

Australia now has data from two major surveys designed to improve empirical knowledge of the extent and levels of Australian *adult* literacy and numeracy proficiency. Countries participating in the first round (IALS) provided population profiles of literacy skill, the definition of which was premised on '[t]he ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work, and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential' (OECD & Statistics Canada 2000 p.x). These were assessed under the three dimensions of prose, document and quantitative literacy. The more recent survey (ALLS) added problem solving and ICT skills and a revised understanding of quantitative literacy, renamed as numeracy. A number of international reports have also included specific analysis of health literacy - the ability of individuals to access and use health information, make appropriate health decisions and maintain basic health (see Shohet 2002 for discussion).

In Australia, these surveys, coordinated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, involved first round data collection (IALS) in 1996 and a second round (ALLS) in 2006. The surveys involved extensive national and international coordination between governments and statistical agencies. They required complex verification processes and substantial training of ABS staff and integration with household surveys and census collections. The 1996 collection involved 10, 700 people with 9,302 responding (87%) (ABS (McLennan) 1997, p.viii). Following similar processes used in the previous survey, the 2006 collection was drawn from a random sample of 8988 private dwellings throughout non-remote areas of Australia. In addition to task booklets being distributed, a personal interview was conducted with one person between 15 to 74 years from each household selected. This interview provided demographic, linguistic and educational information, as well as data on workforce participation, social capital and well-being, income and access to and use of information technology. Anecdotal evidence from New Zealand and Australia indicate that participants might take anywhere up to 2-3 hours to complete the task booklet depending on skill level and number of tasks attempted.

As with IALS, the focus in ALLS is not on what each individual respondent scores. Rather the purpose of the exercise is to extrapolate to 'population proficiency'. Collection of data, collation of results and extrapolation of findings rely on a notion of generalised achievement across each of the domains (prose, document, and quantitative literacy/numeracy, and problem solving and ICT skills), with each

domain assessed on a 0-500 point scale divided as 5 levels. OECD & Statistics Canada (2000 p. xi) explain that the position on the scale for each participant is determined by the extent to which respondents achieved a score of 80% or more on tasks allocated according to one of five levels within a domain. Hence respondents might achieve a score of 1-5, with level 1 being the lowest level of achievement in a domain. The most recent analysis of Canadian results offers this more everyday explanation:

The relationship between task difficulty and individual proficiency is much like the high jump event in track and field, in which an athlete tries to jump over a bar that is placed at increasing heights. Each high jumper has a height at which he or she is proficient – that is, the jumper can clear the bar at that height with a high probability of success, and can clear the bar at lower heights almost every time. When the bar is higher than the athlete's level of proficiency, however, it is expected that the athlete will be unable to clear the bar consistently. (Statistics Canada & OECD 2005 p. 279)

In simple terms, Level 1 and 2 scores indicate that respondents are not able to cope with everyday tasks, although this is more pronounced in most situations for Level 1 respondents. Level 2 respondents are able to deal with simple and familiar material, although they have difficulty with new tasks. Difficulties experienced by Level 2 respondents are likely to be less obvious than those encountered by people with Level 1 proficiency. Level 3 proficiency in each of the domains is considered to be the minimum required to cope with work demands and life in 'knowledge' or 'information' societies. Level 4 and 5 respondents are able to respond to many demands for higher order information, novel tasks and new calculations. Because of changes made to the nature of tasks in each of IALS and ALLS, only two domains remain comparable across the 1996-2007 data: prose and document literacy.

The OECD/Statistics Canada surveys and related discussions of results portray literacy and numeracy as vital components of access and progress within employment and training. We have no argument with this, however in our view the features of survey discourse over-extend the inferences made about adult literacy and numeracy capacity: on the macro scale benchmarking population statistics and national productivity and locally, aligning literacy and numeracy proficiency with re-skilling and employment implications. These inferences seem to revert to long critiqued views of literacy and numeracy as stand alone skills downloaded at the beginning of education and training, notwithstanding contemporary modifications such as workplace retraining, refresher courses and bridging programs for those with 'rudimentary' skills. Such approaches reinforce uni-dimensional economic take-off models extensively critiqued elsewhere, yet governments, commercial, military and business interests all see these as particularly powerful discourses.

In contrast to these literacy discourses, other researchers (Street, 2005; Searle 1996; Shore, forthcoming) argue that literacy is socially situated, culturally constituted and actively mediated by the local everyday demands of work and life. Like it or not, uses of literacy and numeracy cannot be generalised across cultures, nor taught as isolated technical skills (even though they can be taught as distinctive routines or procedures). Meanings depend upon the social context in which they are embedded. Nevertheless, the socially situated, locally mediated, messy literacy and numeracy practices of everyday life are somewhat at odds with the structured tidy discourses of survey analysis and commentary. In the following sections we present a summary of seven

approaches to extracting and comparing survey findings and then discuss the implications for how researchers and policy makers might make use of the data.

Ways to explore ALLS data

The following summaries are drawn from ALLS Summary Results (ABS 2007).¹

Comparing performance across a decade of data: 1996-2007

The ALLS was designed to identify and measure literacy that can be linked to the social and economic characteristics of people both across and within countries. Some tasks within the prose and document domains were retained from the 1996 survey and hence provide direct comparisons across the decade. A comparison of the SAL (ABS, 1996) and ALLS (ABS, 2006) data indicates a small but statistically significant decrease in the proportion of people at Level 1 for both prose (from 20% in 1996 to 17% in 2006) and document literacy (from 20% in 1996 to 17% in 2006). The proportion of people at Level 2 for document literacy remained stable, while there was a statistically significant increase from 28% to 30% of the population at Level 2 on the prose dimension. The proportion of the population at Level 3 on the prose scale increased significantly from 35% to 37%, with no change for document literacy (36%). Similarly, the proportion of the population at Levels 4 and 5 on both the prose and document scales did not vary significantly. Further, there were significant changes across the older population, with fewer people over the age of 50 attaining Level 1, more people aged 40-44 years attaining Level 2 and more people aged 55-64 attaining Level 3.

In Australia, ALLS was conducted in English. Compared with 1996, however, of those Non English Speaking Background people who migrated to Australia in the five years prior to the survey, there was a statistically significant increase in the proportion of people attaining Level 3 or above on both prose (22% to 38% compared with 54% of the general population) and document (32% to 50% compared with 53% of the general population) scales.

Comparisons by educational status

There was a strong association between educational attainment and achieved literacy levels. For both the prose and document scales, 64% of people with a qualification achieved Level 3 or above, compared with 35% who had no qualification. On the numeracy scale 58% of people with a qualification gained Level 3 or above, compared with 35% with no qualification. Further, achievement on the literacy scales correlated with the number of years in formal education. Those people with 21 or more years of formal study had the highest proportion of scores at Levels 4/5, while those with 10 or fewer years of formal education had the highest proportion of scores in Level 1. In relation to adult learning, the data indicate that if a person participated in either formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to the survey, they were more likely to achieve Level 3 or above for prose and document literacy and numeracy scales. For prose and document scales 58% of people who had participated in learning achieved Level 3 or above, 52% on the numeracy scale, as opposed to 19% prose, 18% document and 14% numeracy of those who had not engaged in learning.

¹ These data were drawn directly from ABS (2007). Given the statistical nature of the data we have been careful not to divert too far from the original.

Labour force status

Across all scales, those employed had the highest proportion with scores of Level 3 or above (prose 60%, document 61%, numeracy 56%, problem-solving 36% and health literacy 47%). Those not in the labour force had the highest proportion assessed at Level 1 or 2 for the prose (63%) and document (67%) scales, and 73% for numeracy Levels 1 and 2. For health literacy and problem solving, those not in the labour force or unemployed had the highest proportion assessed at Level 1 or 2 (75% health, 84% problem solving). Of the population who are in employment, there was little change on prose and document literacy scores from 1996 with the exception of 25-34 years olds who declined in numbers achieving Levels 4/5. Unsurprisingly, 68% of people who read letters, memos or emails at least once a week attained scores of Level 4 or above on the document scale. Similarly, 60% of people who regularly use numbers at least once a week, paying bills, working with spreadsheets or budgets, achieved Level 3 or above on the numeracy scale. There also appeared to be a correlation between personal gross weekly income and level of achievement. The higher the income, the higher the literacy score. A similar result was recorded in relation to use of the internet for online shopping, banking, email and so on.

Using a comparative approach: age

When comparing literacy levels with the age of the population, in general, literacy levels decrease with age. However, significantly, people in the 15-19 years age group had lower literacy levels than the 20-24 year age group. Of the 15-19 year age group, 52% attained skills scores lower than Level 3 on the prose scale, 47% on the document scale and 57% on the numeracy scale, compared with 37% of 20-24 year olds for both prose and document literacy and 45% for numeracy.

Using a comparative approach: gender

In relation to gender, a higher proportion of women attained literacy scores of Level 3 or above on the prose (56%) and health (41%) literacy scales compared with men (52% and 40% respectively). However, there was a higher proportion of males attaining scores of Level 3 or above on document (55%) and numeracy (53%) scales, compared with 51% and 42% for women. Results were the same for problem solving with 30% of both males and females attaining Level 3 or above.

Comparisons by State/Territory

The Australian Capital Territory ranked highest on all scales in the proportion of the population who scored Level 3 or above, followed by Western Australia and South Australia (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of states & territories re percentage of the population achieving Level 3 or above in each domain

State or Territory	Prose	Document	Numeracy	Problem solving
New South Wales	53.9	53.4	47.5	29.7
Victoria	51.2	50.9	45.6	29.4
Queensland	53.5	53.4	47.8	29.2
South Australia	54.9	54.1	48.8	30.4
Western Australia	56.4	55.8	48.8	30.9

Tasmania	51	49.3	43.9	37*
Northern Territory	53.1	53.6	44.9	28*
ACT	68	68	62.9	45.5

* relative standard error of 25-50% use with caution (Searle & Shore: Table developed from aggregated ABS data)

Tasmania had the highest proportion of the population at Level 1 while the ACT had the lowest proportion at this level.

Discussion

In view of our opening comments we suggest that the survey findings have implications for broader VET policy and programs such as the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) and Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL), state adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) programs and adult community education programs (ACE). Yet we also suggest that the survey findings need to be reviewed in light of a number of contradictions inherent in the education-economic productivity dynamic. Interrogating these contradictions is an important step in the take-up of ALLS data for policy activism. Some suggestions for ways of engaging with the findings are presented below.

- How are individual learners positioned re policy and what does this say about ways of understanding literacy as a social practice or autonomous skill?
- What kinds of programs/activities are learners expected to engage in, with what outcomes?
- What can vocational educators/researchers learn from the data and what might we do with it?
- What are the implications for other sectors e.g. health and business?

Individual learners

Sfard and Prusak (2005, p.19) argue “that identities are crucial to learning... identities are likely to play a critical role in determining whether the process of learning will end with what counts as success or with what is regarded as failure”. For some, compulsory schooling discourses are central in the constitution of the ‘failed learner’. The experiences each learner faced throughout their early schooling had the ongoing effect of undermining self esteem and dignity, and possibly provided reasons for an unwillingness to take on further learning, particularly in adult literacy classes. These negative views are further reinforced by very uneven policies of ‘mutual obligation’, in which learner/worker institutional identities are portrayed in deficit terms such as ‘long-term unemployed’. Yet Goldberg (2007, p.4) argues that learners might also be the children of itinerant parents, have left school early to become carers for younger siblings or elderly relatives, not have the skills to use technology at home or work, or have the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Many have developed social support networks but are not successful at accessing or using the literacies required for employment and training.

Variations noted in the state by state comparisons may trickle through socio-demographic variables such as the age of the population, labour force status, patterns of migration and education, to individual experiences of education and training systems. Resource rich states such as Western Australia and Queensland currently

have high employment levels and are also attracting internal migration from other states. There is a general view that anyone who has a qualification can gain employment. Others may be seeking unskilled employment or training on-the-job and may require literacy and/or numeracy assistance. In Tasmania, the proportion of the population in Level 1 might reflect the age profile of the state and require a program and funding response that reflects this.

Analyses of age cohorts presented earlier in this paper would apparently support the Business Council of Australia call to overhaul the education system (BCA President, Mr. Michael Chaney: BCA Media Release 27 August 2007) and recent Australian Council for Educational Research which proposes five further strategies to support the BCA's call for systemic overhaul: earlier interventions; increased customisation; strengthening the teaching profession; increased investment and improved governance. These strategies complement research undertaken by Spierings (2004) and Searle, Funnell and Behrens (2005).

ALN Programs & outcomes

In Australia, Commonwealth funded programs to address these education and training challenges include the Language, Literacy & Numeracy Program (LLNP) and Workplace English Language & Literacy (WELL). Individual states may also provide funding for designated literacy & numeracy programs, or for the integration of LLN into community 'skills' programs. However, the major outcome that is required for all funded programs is greater access to employment or further training. For those individuals, unemployed and reported at Levels 1 and 2, the LLNP classes are often their first, post-compulsory school learning experiences. These classes should provide opportunities not only to improve skills in literacy and numeracy, build confidence and acquire a range of social capital previously unable to be accessed or enacted, but also to discover new learning identities. However, the outcomes based curriculum of LLNP programs is often too prescriptive to encompass the broader accumulations of social capital and reinvention of identities upon which socially situated literacy approaches are premised.

Combining skills based learning and self-confidence is not a new idea in education and training, but recent research emphasises the *interconnectedness* of the traditional economically driven notion of human capital and the more recent concept of social capital. Schuller, Bynner and Feinstein (2004) argue the two can be combined to generate a notion of identity capital, or, in terms of learning, 'capability'. While capital is based on the development of assets, (social, cultural and psychological, as well as financial and human), capability is the potential that individuals may possess to do or to be, particularly in relation to their identity as a learner. As such, capability may well be a more reliable indicator of work readiness, persistence or engagement in learning.

Data from the ALLS survey also documented social participation and wellbeing in relation to the prose and document literacy dimensions. Results indicate that participation as an unpaid volunteer in a group or organisation (particularly sporting groups and neighbourhood or community/school associations), and general satisfaction with life, were most prevalent in the proportion of the population at Level 3 on both the prose and document dimensions. The implications are that these people have both the skills and the motivation to participate in society, take on volunteer

work and develop social networks. They also report that they are generally satisfied or extremely satisfied with life. People achieving at Level 2 rank second on these indicators, followed by those achieving Levels 4/5. So achieving higher levels of literacy, which may be equated with education, qualifications, workforce participation and higher levels of income, does not necessarily equate with rates of social participation or high satisfaction with life.

Of more concern are those people achieving at Level 1 on prose and document dimensions who would have difficulty communicating via e-mail or text messages; have difficulty in deciphering signs around them which can affect their lives at any time; and have difficulty accessing information to make informed decisions. They may find it difficult to deal with the formalities of housing and health. While the data suggests that overall the proportion of the population at Levels 1 and 2 have decreased since 1996, it would appear the unemployed or those not in the workforce for other reasons (age, disability, child support demands and so on) still face substantial literacy and numeracy difficulties. LLNP and community educators and trainers may well need opportunities to revisit some of the basic assumptions of their practice given these shifts in the learning identities.

What can vocational educators learn from the data?

The Australian ALLS results were released during an important moment in political change—a new Labor government after 11 years of a conservative Federal Coalition. All states have Labor governments, and this presents some unique opportunities, but a number of issues have yet to be resolved.

We have yet to see the details of the VET in schools policy of the Labor government, but the ALLS data relating to young people is of particular importance for providers of Certificates 1 & 2 in schools (school-based apprenticeships and traineeships) or vocational access courses in TAFE. These data identify that, of the young people in the 15-19 years age group, 52% attained skills scores lower than Level 3 on the prose scale, 47% on the document scale and 57% on the numeracy scale, compared with 37% of 20-24 year olds for both prose and document literacy and 45% for numeracy. This presents a huge challenge to vocational educators.

One response might be to develop a team-teaching model in which a vocational educator teams with a literacy/numeracy teacher to provide learning support. Another response would be to leverage the work already undertaken in integrating LLN into the broader VET system. Vocational education and training programs that integrate language, literacy and numeracy within them have four key characteristics:

- They identify the language, literacy and numeracy competencies (or learning outcomes) essential for training or work performance (or those which underpin the stated industry competencies) and address these competencies as part of the curriculum. They should also identify the social literacies of the workplace, which are often not made explicit.
- They take into account the language, literacy and numeracy competence and needs of the learner and develop these as part of, not separate from, vocational competence.
- They ensure that the language of instruction and assessment used in the vocational program is consistent with that required on-the-job or in the vocational area, and is appropriate for the learner.

- They assess language, literacy and numeracy outcomes in terms of successful performance of relevant and authentic tasks (Searle, 2003).

However, such programs sit within the larger context of the Business Council of Australia critiques of the schools system and the regional employment variations noted above.

What are the implications for other sectors e.g. health and business?

Health

Many countries have recognised that the successive surveys contain rich sources of data about health literacy (cf Shohet 2002). Nevertheless it is still very early days for this specialist research. Data from the ALLS indicate that overall, 13% of the population achieved Level 1 and 30% Level 2 literacy. However, a higher proportion of women achieved Level 3 or above on prose literacy (56%) and health literacy (41%) compared with men (52% and 40% respectively). Further, age also becomes an issue of concern with both young and older people recording lower levels of literacy and numeracy. This has major implications for five areas of health related activity: health promotion; health protection; disease protection; health care and maintenance; and systems navigation. The initial data available indicate that there are complex interrelationships between health and literacy and these warrant more extensive investigations. On the one hand we are aware that certain preventative strategies concerning alcoholism, for example, may be relevant to people regardless of their literacy/numeracy levels. On the other hand, sophisticated literacy skills are required to manage *medical treatments* for health related problems such as diabetes, heart disease or alcoholism. The ALLS data can provide public officials responsible for the provision of health services with the opportunity to refine policy development and improve health service outcomes. This large data set could answer a number of questions about the way individuals use written materials and also the kind of processing required to understand and use information in a range of health contexts. However the data is unlikely to generate large scale change unless it is analysed in the context of the regional cultural and employment variations noted above.

Business & Industry

Literacy and numeracy skills form a major part of any training as well as work performance. They are said to play a part in economic growth and prosperity. Skills shortages across particular industries (for example mining, health and communications) and a decline in the working age population, point to a need for Australia to invest in those adults with few or no vocational qualifications. Data from the ALLS suggests that investment in increasing the literacy skills of adults has a direct and positive impact on labour productivity and in GDP per capita. Success is also reflected in the level of income, while people identifying as managers or professionals form the major proportion of the population in Level 3 and above on all dimensions. Data also indicate that the frequency with which people engage with work related activities, e.g. reading or writing reports, memos, emails or using spreadsheets, performing calculations or using statistical data to reach conclusions, is reflected in the level of literacy or numeracy achieved. As indicated in implications for vocational educators, the ALLS constructs of literacy and numeracy complexity could be used to identify the level of difficulty of a broad range of texts and tasks used in different contexts e.g. written workplace communications, training materials as well as assessment items, to assist with workplace performance.

As mentioned earlier, there was a strong association between educational attainment and achieved literacy levels. In addition, the data indicate that if a person participated in either formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to the survey, they were more likely to achieve Level 3 or above for prose and document literacy and numeracy scales. It would appear therefore that there is a correlation between vocational and employment programs, and on-the-job training, and the literacy and numeracy skills of the labour force. Thus the greatest impact could be gained by investing in improving the skills of adults at the lower levels. The Commonwealth government has for some time encouraged employers to develop literacy/numeracy rich workplaces through application of the WELL program. This program has been shown to be successful in developing concentrated pockets of skill within the workforce, particularly for workers with low literacy and numeracy skills.

Conclusion

In this paper we explore what we can know about Australian literacy practices using measures from the recently released *Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS)* data. One of the recurring myths promoted by governments (and, we would add the media, public and private sector researchers, and many members of education systems and the public) is the ever-impending crisis of (il)literacy levels in the adult population, which is subsequently used to justify back-to-basics campaigns in schools. Simultaneously, these crises activate rising moral panics in adult populations linking (adult) (il)literacy rates with poor health, crime and other negative social indicators. To quell these moral panics government programs, urged on by media and an intolerant business community, tighten administration of welfare and employment payments as companion moves to the back-to-basics movements in schools. We have no argument with the claim that literacy is associated with capacity to access information and resources, to take charge of aspects of ones life. What we would contest is the claim that literacy is the cause of the uneven access to resources between and within countries referenced by the OECD surveys.

Many of the research insights, policy commentaries and recommendations to providers seem to assume tightly controlled and predictable relations between the economy, social relations within and across countries, and individual, cognitive processes of re-skilling. In this paper we extend these understandings of comparison by developing an interdisciplinary framework for engaging survey findings. As Australia prepares to make more of the findings from ALLS results than it might have from IALS results in the mid-1990s, these interdisciplinary insights seem important as a way to interrupt the assumption that the measures tell us everything about literacy as a social practice.

With this in mind we suggest a number of ways forward for policy, practice and research. In terms of policy, it is timely to reissue a call for a new adult literacy policy for Australia that takes account of the new literacies required to participate in society and in the context of lifelong learning. In fact the ALLS data provides evidence of the value of lifelong learning and could inform the review of the 2002 Ministerial Declaration on Adult & Community Education. Secondly, there needs to be a mapping and evaluation of existing provision to identify gaps in provision (as suggested by the data) and alternative outcomes which enhance learning capabilities.

Implications for practice to some extent revolve around identity. Traditionally, vocational teachers'/trainers' identities are tied to their specific area of expertise. ALLS data indicate that practitioners need to engage students in learning and moreover, integrate literacy and numeracy into their practice. Further, literacy and numeracy teachers need to broaden their understandings of social and vocational pedagogies. These shifts cannot be achieved without a review of the often highly prescriptive curricula and the provision of alternative learning pathways.

In this paper we have consciously focused on the data resulting from the ALLS. Our purpose has not been to critique the design or implementation of surveys as a measurement of the literacy 'health' of a population. This has been undertaken elsewhere (see for example Blum, Goldstein, & Guerin-Pace, 2001). A major challenge involves developing a mechanism whereby variable socio-cultural practices might be documented in such a way as to make some comparisons possible, at the same time as we open up for questioning just what is being compared. More practically, it is crucial that the evidence provided by the ALLS is held up for scrutiny across different sectors as it is also used to evaluate the implications for policy and provision.

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