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Camilla Addey

Literacy Assembled as Global in ILSAs

The Danger of a Single Story

Abstract: This paper seeks to understand how literacy is operationalized in International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) and how this has transformed the way literacy is now conceptualised. Although there was a shift in the 1980s away from literacy understood as autonomous from its social context to an understanding of literacy as a social practice dependent on its social, cultural and institutional contexts of practice, this paper shows how ILSAs have brought an autonomous understanding of literacy back. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies and Adichie's 'The Danger of the Single Story', this paper analyses the *literacy assessment diagram* – the backbone of OECD's literacy assessment framework for ILSAs – which describes the logical steps through which literacy is made a quantifiable fact. The paper shows how literacy is organized, chosen, measured, made legitimate and interpreted inside the laboratory and then made to hold as it is returned to the big, wild world. The paper argues that the operationalization of literacy in ILSAs pays lip service to the social practice conceptualization of literacy and assembles a single story of literacy as global – a universal skill that is autonomous of all social, cultural and institutional contexts of practice. The parallels with Adichie's story highlight the danger of this global, assembled literacy becoming the single framework of interpretation and action.

Keywords: International Large-Scale Assessments, Global Literacy, Single Story, Adult Literacy Conceptualization, Science and Technology Studies (STS)

1. Introduction

How did the ILSA phenomenon (and the consequent operationalization of a literacy concept) transform[1] the way literacy is understood today? Since the appearance of International Large-Scale Assessments of adult literacy skills[2], literacy has increasingly been understood as an internationally comparable, quantifiable fact – so much so that *literacy as numbers* (Hamilton, Maddox & Addey, 2015) now frames most statements about adult education. This represents a change in the conceptualization of literacy,

1 The transformatory nature – in terms of influence and impact of ILSAs on policy and practice have been analysed in numerous studies (see for example: Waldow & Steiner-Khamsi, 2019; Fischman, Marcetti Topper, Silova, Goebel & Holloway, 2018; Baird et al., 2016; Martens, Niemann & Teltemann, 2016; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Grek, 2009).

2 ILSAs generally refer to all international standardised tests implemented across different contexts. The most widely known one is the OECD's PISA. In this paper, when I refer to ILSAs, I refer exclusively to the four main adult literacy ILSAs (mentioned below) and not to ILSAs testing students in school.

which had seen widespread acknowledgement of literacy as a plural, social practice since the 1980s. In the 1980s, ethnographic research by Shirley Heath in *Ways with Words* (1983), by Brian Street in *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984), and by Ruth Finnegan in *Literacy and Orality* (1988), argued that literacy should be viewed as social practices embedded in everyday life, thus challenging the dominant conceptualization of literacy as a skill independent of its users and contexts of practice. The two conceptualizations have remained in tension, each existing and advancing in different settings, until the appearance and growth of ILSAs. With the advent of ILSAs, literacy has become once again widely conceived as a skill which can be standardized and compared across every context and culture, providing the same economic, social and cultural implications for all.

The debate on how to define literacy is an open-ended one, in part because it is a concept which evolves as text-based activities evolve, and partly because no definition can do justice to such a plural practice (UNESCO, 2008; Robinson, 2014). However, the debate on how to define literacy and how to operationalise it has never ceased (Milana, Webb, Holford, Waller & Jarvis, 2018).

Initially narrowly defined and measured by UNESCO and national statistical offices as the simple ability to read and write, literacy was conceptualized as a dichotomous skill that one either had or did not have. The dichotomous understanding of literacy/illiteracy goes hand in hand with literacy conceived as a skill that can be learnt out of context and applied in all settings, having an autonomous, deterministic effect on the life of the newly literate (i.e. on his economic situation). Extensive research (i.e. Street, 1984; 1995; Boudard & Jones, 2003; Maddox & Esposito, 2011) and advocacy initiatives have supported abandoning the dichotomous conceptualizations and measures.

Having been involved in and carried out research on adult literacy programmes adopting the autonomous approach, Brian Street suggested a different way of understanding literacy, which contrasted sharply with what he calls the autonomous model or the skills theory. In 1984, Street's ethnographic research[3] substantiated his argument that the autonomous model of literacy infers literacy is autonomous of social context, which he contrasts with an ideological model. The ideological model highlights how literacy is 'deeply integrated with social and ideological conditions' (personal communication with Street in 2015) and thus the meanings and values of literacy cannot be understood separately from social, cultural, and institutional context of practice (Hamilton, 2001, 2013). Text-mediated literacy is a historically and culturally embedded social practice, situated in social structures involving the social relationships, values, attitudes, and feelings of individuals (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000). For this reason, the field that grew from Street's work, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) conceptualizes literacy as plural (many vernacular literacies) with different literacies according to the different

3 Street's research established the New Literacy Studies (first mentioned by Gee in 1990) or Literacy as Social Practice, an understanding of literacy which has been key in the way organizations have conceptualized literacy.

domains of life and defined by the individual and wider community goals and cultural practices[4] (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000, p. 8).

As NLS informed a shift away from the autonomous model and its measurements (proxies, census questions), and the need to measure literacy as a social practice and as a continuum of levels led international organizations to seek new approaches to measuring literacy levels (Addey, 2018). This resulted in the development of four ILSAs of adult literacy which have been widely implemented: the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), and the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). IALS, ALL, LAMP and PIAAC all require participating governments to translate and submit a standardized test to individuals in randomly sampled households. The results are placed along a continuum of competences from poorly literate to proficiently literate, doing away with the concept of illiteracy. The standardized test is problematic for multiple reasons, but most importantly, no standardized test which is the same for everyone can fairly represent the literacy practices of all. A standardized international test will by definition represent an elected literacy, one of the many literacies (Hamilton & Barton, 2000). Shortly after the appearance of ILSAs, Hamilton (2001) wrote a critique about how the project of social ordering of ILSAs privileges *a* literacy at the expense of all other every day literacies, thus organizing our knowledge of literacy. This elected literacy, which is supposedly the same for all across the world whatever their literacy practices, contexts and purposes – is what ILSAs assembled as global literacy.

Departing from a New Literacy Studies approach to literacy, the analysis discussed in this paper draws on the theoretical assumptions of Science and Technology Studies and Adichie's (2009) experience of *'The danger of a single story'*[5] to explore how a single story of literacy has been chosen, defined, organized, measured, legitimated and interpreted in ILSAs. The paper argues that ILSAs have redefined literacies as *global literacy,* described as assembled and single. The assembled nature of this concept helps understand how a global literacy has come to dominate the epistemological

4 Ethnographic accounts have been used to illustrate individual's vernacular every day, contextualized, literacy practices – practices which are not counted as literacy. In *Hidden Literacies,* Nabi, Rogers & Street (2009), recount stories of people who consider themselves (and are labelled) illiterates but on a daily basis rely on their complex literacy and numeracy practices: "An illiterate domestic servant 'reads' when preparing breakfast and 'writes' when taking a message over the telephone or making a note about laundry given to the cleaner. An illiterate street beggar keeps a record of the money she acquires and the loans she makes. Shop keepers and self-employed workers have their own informal literacy and numeracy practices. To these people, what they are doing does not count as 'literacy'; only the kind of literacy which is taught in schools or in adult literacy learning programmes is 'real literacy' – and they have not been to school or adult literacy class. So they still think of themselves as 'illiterate'." (2009, p. ix). Street's 1984 ethnographic research tells similar stories: people labelled as illiterate using their religious-related literacy in their everyday commercial activities.

5 Available at http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story (21/09/2020).

pluralism of literacy, whilst the parallelism between global literacy and Adichie's single story provide insights into the limits of flattened educational narratives. The questions which arise from this argument feed into debates concerned with the way ILSAs are changing educational policy and practices to form global citizens for a competitive global economy.

2. A Theoretical Framing

To understand the current making of scientific facts and technological innovation (like ILSAs), Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe (2011) describe the current age as the 'regime of exactness'. In this age starting at the end of the 18th century, external interference and human intervention are eliminated from the scientific process as they disturb the increasingly sensitive instruments. Purity, precision, and exactness can only be created in secluded laboratories. Only a restricted, heterogeneous group of experts with specialized knowledge can access the laboratory and the instruments to make fresh knowledge. In the case of ILSAs, we see a restricted group of highly selected literacy experts and assessment technicians enter secluded spaces (i.e. high level board meetings behind closed doors). Here the experts and technicians choose, define, organize, measure, legitimize and interpret a way of measuring literacy, taking political decisions without the interference of lay people. This secluded space is populated by human actors, but also non-human actors (understood as having equal agency when assembled in a network) which include among others, the *literacy assessment diagram,* psychometric models, computers, and software packages.

The production of scientific knowledge in the 'regime of exactness' goes through three stages: the first, second and third translation. In the first translation, a research collective "grasps hold of the macrocosm" (Callon et al., 2011, p. 49) – described as big, wild, complex, enigmatic, scattered, unrelated, heterogeneous, abundant, coloured and varied – in order to reduce it, simplify it and translate it into amenable entities that can be brought back to the laboratory in a manageable scale. The plurality of literacy practices in disparate contexts are therefore made amenable from their social, cultural, and institutional context of practice and chosen to represent the literacy which will be perfected in the laboratory. In the second translation, a restricted research collective forms in the laboratory to manipulate, stabilise and interpret the world "often through heated debates and discussions" (Callon et al., 2011, p. 56). In this confined space, they rely on machines and instruments and on formalized procedures and protocols to devise and manipulate the simplified worlds they have brought back. The inscriptions they fabricate are perfected, stabilized and interpreted. Undisturbed, they apply their specialized knowledge and perfect the instruments so they will work universally and without error, eliminate all human bias and external intervention, settle relations of domination and exclusion and produce enriched ways to reveal adult literacy practices, understand them, and act on them. It is in this stage, that the literacy brought back to the laboratory is defined, organized, and measured. The third translation stage is one fraught with danger –

will the previously unknown entities, developed in the laboratory, hold as they return to the big wild world? Who will be its allies? Who will be its adversaries? Will it work? Will the instruments lose that "something extra that makes the difference" (Callon et al., 2011, p. 48)? In order for the "infinitely richer" world that has been brought into being in the laboratory to hold (without losing what was gained in the laboratory) in the real world, the return has to be organized by laboratizing the world – the wild has to be made to resemble the laboratory by reproducing "the conditions of the laboratory" (Callon et al., 2011, p. 7). To do this, the research collective mobilizes resources and support (in particular from those who have money and influence) and constructs and disseminates new laboratories close to the users. During this phase, the research collective has to counteract "fierce adversaries" (Callon et al., 2011, p. 64) who are not supportive of the re-organizing of their world. Here we see how the "infinitely richer" (Callon et al., 2011, p. 59) world of literacy (a global, assembled literacy) that has been created is legitimized and interpreted as the wild world is laboratized to fit it.

Finally, this paper draws on STS to describe how facts are not intrinsically true or false, but their truthfulness and falsehood acquired through the allies who join assemblages to produce a fact and maintain it as true (Latour, 1987). According to Law (2007) there is no given, permanent social order but 'order' is plural, materially heterogeneous, ephemeral and constantly remaking itself through the processes of network translations (creation of assemblages). In other words, facts and artefacts are collectively held and made true, their durability and robustness given by the number of allies an assemblage can enrol. The assembling of actors in the production, implementation and interpretation of ILSAs (testing agencies, national governments, policy makers, educators, researchers, and so on) temporarily creates a social project which furthers disparate interests, lasting as long as the social project serves sufficient interests and maintains a sufficient number of allies. The durability and stability of ILSA assemblages makes global literacy a shared assumption. The concept of 'assemblage' thus helps understand how global literacy is made true and maintained.

The paper also draws on the experience of multiple-award-winning novel writer and feminist, Chimamanda Adichie, who recounts through her personal experience, what it means to learn to read and write stories when the only literature you are exposed to has been written in a context and culture you do not belong to. Throughout her childhood, Adichie reads books written in the global north. In *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009), she recounts how books were about foreigners, unknown places, lives and cultures which she could not identify with. And so when she started to write stories, she also wrote about foreigners, unaware that books could be about her world. When she discovered local literature with authors like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, she recounts:

> I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized. (Minute 2:14)

She goes on to recount her experience of migrating to the USA for her studies, where she not only learns to identify herself with what she is defined as (Black) in a predominantly white context, but also that the people she meets have a single story of catastrophe about Africa which they associate with her. Until she learns how she is understood through this single story of Africa, until her friends start to learn there is more than one story about Africa, interaction and mutual understanding is problematic. Adichie also discovers during a trip to Mexico that her exposure to the dominant US narrative on the Mexican migrants made her adopt the US single story about Mexicans.

> I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself. So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become. (Minute 8:53)

Adichie argues that the single story – the story chosen and told over and over again until it becomes a fact, a truth, the only framework of interpretation – must be understood through the principle of power known as *nkali,* translated as "being greater than another" (Adichie, 2009, Minute 9:45). The *nkali* of the single story flattens all other stories, making one story the dominant one. Adichie argues that a single story is always incomplete, it tells the story of those who have *nkali* and wipes out the value and dignity of all the other stories. The single story highlights not only who defines the story, but how it impacts on us all. It does not take much to see the parallelisms with the global literacy that the phenomenon of ILSAs have assembled through their frequent implementations: repeated over and over again, until the only story of literacy is the one that has been chosen, defined, organized, measured, legitimized and interpreted in ILSAs.

Finally, this paper relates to the work of Espeland and Stevens (2008) who argue that processes of commensuration change the realities and ontologies they measure, by creating a language to describe reality and providing the techniques to manage and manipulate what was formerly unstable, uncertain, elusive and too rich of complexity. They argue that measurement and the powerful institutions behind the measurement practices construct what is measured, change meanings, and intervene in the social worlds depicted, causing "people to think and act differently" (Espeland & Stevens, 2008, p. 412). The danger of the single story of global literacy is made all the more important if we recognize that this conceptualization has the power to make people think and act differently, unless there is awareness of the single story and the value of epistemological pluralism of literacy.

3. The Literacy Assessment Framework: Reassembling a Global Literacy

This paper draws on the theoretical contributions discussed here above to take a closer look at the diagram (see Fig. 1 below) which backs the development of literacy as an internationally measurable, standard set of skills. Presented as *the* model which is used to construct and interpret ILSA tests and data, the diagram represents a logical sequence of steps necessary to tame messy, uncertain, intangible literacy practices into certainty, routinized facts taken for granted that can be counted, compared and used as scientific evidence to inform policy and educational practice. The diagram can be seen as an attempt to legitimize a chosen representation of literacy: from the way it is conceptualized and defined, all the way to how the representation through numbers is given meaning.

The first logical step is one of defining. What can be defined as literacy in the wild world that the experts can make amenable and bring back to the laboratory? What literacy is worth being transported to the laboratory? In this stage, experts strip literacy of its complexity, reduce it in order to bring it back to their secluded work space. Uncertain practices, vernacular literacies, local meanings, social practices, diverse institutional practices, are reduced to a literacy that can be standardized and carried back to the laboratory. So although ILSA assessment frameworks claim broad definitions of literacy, the quantification and standardization process require seizing hold of 'the complex and enigmatic world' of literacies and *'simplifying and pruning'* them. Literacies are reduced to the small scale of the laboratory, and are replaced with a literacy that can

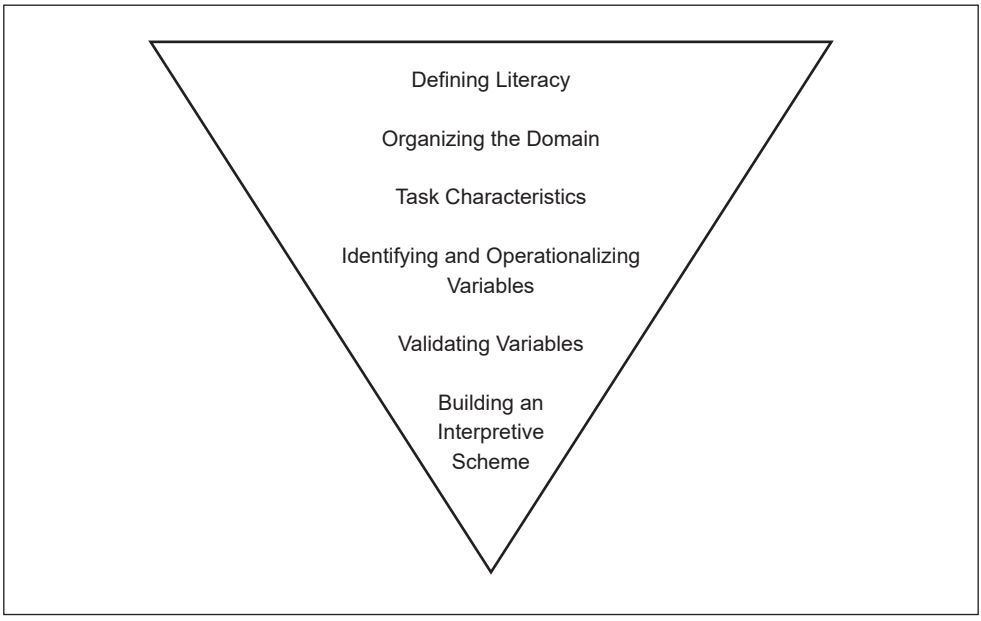

Fig. 1: Literacy assessment diagram (reproduced from Kirsch, 2001, with permission from the author, Irwin Kirsch)

be manipulated for the purposes of the assemblage (in this case internationally comparable quantification). In this seizing process, the literacy definition's boundaries are delimited – the experts decide what literacy is in and which literacies are out – this is how the global literacy starts to take shape.

Upon returning to the laboratory, technicians, experts, scientists, private companies and non-human actors start to devise and perfect their instruments. At first, they *organize* literacy into three kinds of literacy to be valued: prose, document and numeracy. This involves a process of inclusion of certain literacies but also the exclusion of many others (in some cases material limitations impose their exclusion). The debates are heated as decisions have to be taken. As the restricted research collective perfects the instruments, decisions need to be made as each domain will include a set of tasks. The assemblage is growing: it now includes assessment frameworks, domains, tasks, test items, and new experts who are called upon. At this stage, the shape of the chosen literacy is becoming visible. Many other literacies have already been excluded. The plurality of literacy, the many different literacy stories, are quickly fading away into unknown and devalued vernacular literacies.

In order to perfect the instruments, the tasks now must be manipulated in order to allow interpretation of test performance. In other words, the tasks need to be made more and less difficult. This is done by manipulating three main variables: 1) a variety of contexts and content; 2) a range of materials and text types which include prose and document literacy; and 3) processes and strategies which the reader is likely to use to respond to the test. On the basis of the variables which define each test item, a value of difficulty and performance is attributed. During this operationalization, a level of familiarity must be maintained in the tasks so that the test items represent real life literacy practices but at the same time they must be sufficiently unfamiliar so that the test-takers will not respond without having to read the text.[6] In the laboratory, we now see a set of non-human actors join the assemblages – they are statistical theories like Item Response Theory but also software packages – which are called upon to establish the scale and a value for each test item, and where the test item is placed on a value scale. Shortly after, more statistical theories, software, and experts are called upon to further validate the test items. For example, statistical processes like Differential Item Functioning (DIF) are run to evaluate levels of test item bias, leading some test items that function differently across contexts or subgroups to be eliminated from the final test batteries. Pilot studies are carried out, bringing on board testers and testees, testing booklets, pilot data, and so on. The assemblage is stabilizing as more and more actors, in particular non-human actors join.

What we see here is that the test items are bringing into being and domesticating a somewhat artificial literacy. The process of organizing domains, selecting tasks and manipulating test item allows the restricted research collective to apply their specialized

6 The development of test items and how they are embedded in social contexts and activities has extensively been studied by Maddox (2015a, 2015b). His work shows the contextual and interactive dimensions of performance in ILSAs.

knowledge without external interference and human intervention which would create error and human bias. Relations of power[7] are settled inside the laboratory and embedded in the 'enriched' ways of understanding the world of literacy. But the instruments and the data they produce will soon have to face the wild big world outside the laboratory. The uncertainties of plural literacies in the big wild world were removed when they were transported back into the laboratory, manipulated, perfected into exact instruments of literacy calculation. So will the ILSA instruments and data hold upon return? Will they work? Who will be their allies? Who will be their adversaries? Will the instruments lose that "something extra that makes the difference" (Callon et al., 2011, p. 48)? To return to the big wild world, the newly assembled global literacy needs to be given meaning – to defeat those proposing alternatives and to enrol new allies in the assemblage.

Performance on the test items is thus given meaning. Establishing how the instruments and their data are to be read means establishing what the ability to complete tasks and the score achieved actually mean in terms of functioning in society, and therefore how the data can be read regardless of context. The variables are used to describe the scale and explain how each test taker's performance indicates his capacity to function in society – although this assumes a common understanding of what functioning in a text-mediated way in society means and that this can be the same for all. The question of how to interpret the data is resolved by categorizing the literacy metrics into a single-scale continuum, divided into five levels. The levels are then described in relation to what literacy skills are required by society. It is now, that the global literacy that has been assembled returns to the world, coated with a framework of interpretation. The research collective in the laboratory seeks new allies and resources which will allow the laboratory-made instruments to hold in the wild world. This is achieved through the writing and distribution of reports that interpret the data, technical capacity building on how to use the data, data launch events, but also through a discourse and advocacy activities that aim to discredit former adult literacy measurement methods. For example, the UNESCO ILSA known as LAMP, involved capacity building in government bodies which sought to displace dichotomous literacy measurement activities. STS would describe this as a process of laboratizing the world which allows the 'something new' that has been gained in the laboratory to hold, acquire allies, and defeat its adversaries. As this global literacy is returned to the wild world, what happened in the laboratory (including the philosophical doubts, heated debates, close friendships which have allowed heated debates to be settled, time constraints, material limitations, etc.) is lost and the instruments become taken for granted facts and artefacts. Indeed, Latour (1987) reminds us that the fate of facts and artefacts are in the hands of the users, who do not know their former lives.

7 I.e. more powerful actors impose their choices on what counts as literacy, the voice of some actors are excluded (i.e. at observed meetings this was done through strict deadlines, sophisticated expertise, actors feeling uncomfortable expressing their ideas in English during meetings).

4. Literacy Assembled as Global

This assembled, global literacy is not derived from democratic, universal debates and global consensus on what literacy might represent all literacies, but from decisions taken in secluded laboratories which have worked to enrol allies and resources that have assembled a global literacy. With ILSAs enrolling a growing number of allies and resources worldwide, the decisions that have been made inside the laboratory about what literacy is, how it is organized, chosen, measured, made legitimate and interpreted are no longer visible but become taken for granted.

Choosing, defining, organizing, measuring, legitimizing and interpreting literacy as a social project which is maintained as a truth by an increasing number of actors, with regular implementations, is the process through which the single story is created. As Adichie says, *"show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become."* By reproducing global literacy over and over again through regular implementations, it becomes the single story of literacy for all. But just like Adichie's experience of the single story cautions, flattening and de-complexifying literacy carries dangers. This assembled global literacy, which is widely known through the ordered, comparable, factual numbers which ILSAs produce, ends up dominating how we think of literacy and wipes out all other literacies and ways of conceptualizing literacy. It becomes our only framework of interpretation and action. The concept of *nkali* highlights how the single story of literacy has the power to wipe out the value and dignity of all other literacies. What literacies are losing their dignity through ILSAs? Which literacies are being devalued? Which literacies are being wiped out by the assembled global literacy? Although the instruments may represent valuable tools depending on the purpose for which they are used, educational policy and practice need to draw on these instruments as *one* of the many literacy stories. Drawing on Espeland and Stevens (2008) and Adichie (2009), we can conclude that the measurement and the powerful institutions[8] behind ILSA measurement practices, which are hidden in laboratories and embedded in the data, give power to this global and assembled literacy which changes meanings, intervenes in social worlds, and leads people to think and act differently, with the risk of all other literacies being devalued.

The literacy picture is complex and the diagnosis and its uses require a complex understanding, dependent on their literacy contexts, purposes and practices. Thus, what this chapter is arguing is that global literacy is not intrinsically bad *per se* as some might mistakenly conclude from this chapter, but that, in Adichie's words, global literacy is only one of the many literacy stories. The epistemological pluralism of literacy *does* include global literacy, but it is *only one* of many literacy stories. Educational policy and practice require all these literacy stories. In so far as educational policy and practice draw on global literacy as one of the many stories and one way of knowing, ILSAs are a valuable technological contribution to education.

8 The institutions heavily involved in ILSAs are the OECD, IEA, UNESCO, and the World Bank.

Finally, it may be worth attempting an analogy between national educational systems being made free and compulsory as the most powerful instrument used to confer the new citizens of a nation-state with a set of shared skills, knowledge and national values (Berman, 2019), and the global social project of ILSAs that is transforming all people through their educational systems into citizens of the global economy. As states stripped peoples of their sub-national differences (languages, cultures, etc.) and created national identities (i.e. Italians, French, etc.), ILSAs also strip national diversity and culture away to provide everyone with a measure of global skills and knowledge to measure their global competitiveness. Darville (1999), Hamilton & Barton (2000), Hamilton (2001), and Atkinson (2015) all argue that literacy as it is measured in ILSAs measures a new capitalism literacy, an ideal literacy that all people should have to be able to engage in a neo-liberal society. Everyday literacy is no longer all literacy practices, but everyday literacy to compete in the global economy. The devaluing of diversity in ILSAs therefore becomes the opportunity for everyone to be equally global competitive citizens in the same global market – a social ordering project which relies on a shared conceptualization of literacy. In the same way that Desrosières (1998), Bruno et al. (2006), Igo (2007) and Espeland & Stevens (2008) argue that developing comparable statistics and accounting standards of disparate people and attributes is a crucial part of modern nation-building, ILSAs and the processes they generate are a seminal part of building a global competitive economy.

Drawing on the pivotal work of Gorur on the sociology of numbers, indicators, and standards which demonstrate the performative and normative character of commensuration, "we *might then ask not only what kinds of tools are better able to measure the world, but also what type of worlds we would like to create.*" (2017, p. 353). ILSAs may be part of creating a global competitive economy that strips people of their local stories and practices, but is this the world we want to create?

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Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der Frage, wie Literalität in Internationalen Large-Scale-Assessments (ILSAs) operationalisiert wird und wie dies die Konzeptualisierung von Literalität heute verändert. Obwohl sich das Verständnis von Literalität in den 1980er Jahren verschoben hat, weg von einer vom Kontext unabhängigen Literalität, hin zu Literalität als einer sozialen Praxis, die von ihren sozialen, kulturellen und institutionellen Praxiskontexten abhängt, zeigt dieser Artikel, wie die ILSAs ein autonomes Verständnis von Literalität zurückgeholt haben. Auf der Grundlage von Science and Technology Studies und Adichie's „The Danger of the Single Story" analysiert dieser Artikel das Diagramm zur Erfassung von literaler Kompetenz – das Rückgrat des OECD-Rahmens zur Bewertung von literaler Kompetenz für ILSAs –, in dem die logischen Schritte beschrieben werden, durch die Literalität zu einer quantifizierbaren Tatsache gemacht wird. Der Beitrag zeigt, wie Literalität im Labor organisiert, ausgewählt, gemessen, als rechtmäßig erklärt und interpretiert wird, um sie dann in der großen, unübersichtlichen Welt zu verankern. Der Beitrag argumentiert, dass die Konzeptualisierung der ILSAs von Literalität als sozialer Praxis ein bloßes Lippenbekenntnis ist. Literalität wird in den ILSAs als globale und universelle Fähigkeit zusammengefasst, die in der Praxis unabhängig von sozialen, kulturellen und institutionellen Kontexten ist. Die Parallelen zu Adichie's Geschichte verdeutlichen die Gefahr, dass das globale und universelle Verständnis von Literalität zum alleinigen Interpretations- und Handlungsrahmen werden kann.

Schlagwörter: Internationale Vergleichsteststudien, Globale Literalität, Single Story, Konzeptualisierung von Literalität Erwachsener, Wissenschafts- und Technikforschung

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