

## REVIEW

### Beyond Economic Interests

A Review by TANNIS ATKINSON and NANCY S. JACKSON

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Beyond Economic Interests: Critical Perspectives on Adult Literacy and Numeracy in a Globalised World

Edited by KEIKO YASUKAWA and STEPHEN BLACK  
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This volume reflects the many faces of the adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) field since the introduction, more than two decades ago, of OECD surveys that define and measure ALN as a contribution to economic productivity, efficiency and growth. The book highlights the transition to statistical tools as the only legitimate form of knowledge about literacy and explores a range of alternative visions and creative practices that focus on 'the meaning of literacy and numeracy in people's lives' (Yasukawa and Black 2016: 21).

The core of the book is a glimpse into the state of ALN practice in diverse contexts in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand reflecting the fact that the collection grew out of the 2013 national conference of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy. Many of the authors are ALN practitioners who describe instances of steadfastly clinging to visions of their work as serving a broader social good than the narrow economic interests to which it has been increasingly tied. In this, they join a chorus of similar voices from other parts of the industrialised world, including our own (Atkinson 2013, Jackson 2005), describing ALN work that persists despite policy efforts to reshape it.

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The introduction to the three-part volume provides a strong unifying vision for this quite diverse collection of chapters which, as the editors note, aims to provide ‘resources that help participants in the field to develop a critical perspective about the dominant discourses and to imagine alternative futures.’ Part One lays out the context in which ALN practitioners work. The first chapter discusses the rise of international surveys as the source of official knowledge about literacy; Hamilton argues that abstract discourses assemble literacies that are ‘materialised through everyday, educational testing and policy practices.’ In the second chapter Yasukawa and Black unpack the roots of their own sense of alienation from contemporary policies, analysing the evolution of the ALN Strategy to argue that such policies are engineered in a social world far removed from that of most ALN learners and practitioners. Chapter three introduces tools for critically assessing statistical accounts of ALN: Evans outlines the conceptual bases and methodological choices of the OECD surveys, offers examples of how the interpretation of survey statistics can be questioned but also argues for ‘alternative research programmes’ that could push back against the current tendency to reduce ALN to a set of ‘narrow competencies.’

The title of Part Two is ‘Resistance and Agency in Local Literacies and Numeracies’ and the contributions here focus on illustrating some of the alternative visions that persist in spite of the narrowing effects of current policies and discourses. In this section ALN practitioners tell their stories about diverse local meanings of literacy/numeracy, including the variety of practices in ALN programs and community settings, and efforts to support and sustain such diversity. Two chapters discuss the complexities of ALN programming in the widely divergent contexts of two remote indigenous communities (Kral), and in a major urban setting of classes for Adult Migrant English Learners (Ollerhead). Other chapters discuss institutional challenges, such as how uneven allocation of resources to ALN students and staff can further marginalize these adults (Strauss), or how data-driven accountability mechanisms serve to monitor compliance rather than support educational outcomes (Coben and McCartney). Holland discusses how cognitive, skills-focused learning has gained ascendance in workplace learning at the expense of developing social, emotional and relational capacities. Yasukawa and Widin shift the focus from individual to institutional practices, exploring how ‘museum literacies’ have the effect of constructing inclusions or exclusions of different

visitor groups. Boughton argues that the OECD's human capital approach attempts to silence more radical understandings of how ALN work can support social equality.

The final section (Part Three) offers four examples of how the unquestioned acceptance of the transnational agenda for ALN might be contested. Duckworth and Hamilton offer the RaPAL network in the UK as illustrating how to assert the value of practitioner knowledge. McCormack documents the Four Literacies framework developed in the state of Victoria in the 1980s, proposing its broad understanding of what ALN learners need as an antidote to current framings. Evans and Simpson describe the history of the Radical Statistics Group, outlining some of its more and less successful efforts to promote the use of critical approaches to statistics to support progressive social change. In the final chapter Hunter argues that training for ALN practitioners can provide a rare opportunity to cultivate critical thinking about how their work is constrained and curtailed by current policies.

Overall the collection foregrounds the fact that policies based on economic logics and survey statistics have silenced practitioner wisdom and done little to address the barriers faced by those marginalised adults who struggle with literacy and numeracy. It does offer inspiration for alternative, more learner-centered ways of doing ALN work. Yet we are left with the feeling that many of these examples are a little nostalgic, celebrating the ways that familiar critical ideas from the past are still relevant and possible today. This falls somewhat short of the implied promise of the book title to offer a visionary breakthrough that carries the field 'beyond' the constraints of the economic logic of our times. At the same time, given how quickly policy framings and dominant discourses make other views 'impossible to think' (Fendler 1998), there is definitely value in documenting the rich diversity in ways of thinking, being and doing that have characterized ALN work.

As reviewers we also had another expectation for this volume that mostly was not realized, one that perhaps reflects our own longings for future directions in the field. We hope to see more work that contributes to a detailed interrogation of ALN policy as an active social process. Work that asks, for example, what are the mechanisms through which OECD statistical data has systematically extinguished practitioner knowledge and repositioned practitioners as functionaries rather than as educators? We continue to wonder who is responding to the challenge by Brandt and Clinton (2002) that literacy studies

find ways to better analyse connections between the global and the local. We eagerly await more research, like that of Pinsent-Johnson (2015), documenting the mechanisms through which ALN policy and practice are aligned, locally and globally, but also studies that investigate what enables, and limits, educators' attempts to prioritise the human needs of ALN students over the documentary demands of current policies. While it is important to honour and celebrate the 'experience, aspirations and hopes of practitioners and students,' as McCormack says in this volume, what remains under-examined is how these visions have become increasingly difficult to realize, and what role statistics have played in smothering those dreams.

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