

## Revisiting the determinants of literacy proficiency

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### **What are the research questions?**

This study focuses on two questions: What factors influence literacy proficiency at the individual (micro) level? How does observed change in national literacy profiles relate to country (macro) level changes in the factors that influence literacy proficiency at the individual level?

### **Why this study?**

Together, the PIAAC and IALS studies make two comparable measures of literacy proficiency available spanning about 20 years for 12+ countries, making it possible to examine changes to the underlying structure of the determinants of literacy proficiency in a cross-national setting, and to ascertain how well changes in micro-level determinants of proficiency over time aggregate into changes to macro-level literacy profiles. For policymakers to augment adult literacy competencies, it is important to understand how the determinants of literacy proficiency may be implicated in the development of literacy from an individual lifecycle perspective, as well as how they may be implicated in development of national profiles of literacy proficiency as countries' socio-demographic make-up, socio-cultural practices and economies change over time.

### **What are the findings?**

- With some variation, education is one of the most important micro-level predictors over time and across models. This is followed by immigration status, parents' education and type of occupation.
- When indirect effects of parents' education are taken into account using a structural model, parent's education becomes the most important predictor in the UK and US, and this has increased over time.
- A few countries have significantly worse literacy profiles over time (incl. Norway, Sweden, US). More so than otherwise expected from increases to the proportion of foreign speaking adults and despite substantial increases to the proportion: of higher level qualifications among individuals and their parents; those who undertake adult education/training; and, those working in high skilled occupations.
- Despite growing number of adults with higher qualifications and in higher skilled occupations, there is a drop in the proportion of adults who report engaging in at least two types of reading at work per week in most countries including the US.

### **What are the implications?**

The findings suggest that micro-level relationships and results related to the determinants of literacy proficiency do not aggregate well into macro-level results. This is an indication of the importance of assessing micro-level statistical results within a macro level framework of analysis with careful consideration of the mechanisms that link antecedent factors and outcomes. Educational and occupational quality may partly explain why micro-level results do not necessarily translate into macro level results. Alternatively stated, there is increasing variation in proficiency among higher-level qualifications and skilled occupations, particularly as these become more prevalent. Moreover, this increased variation may be related to socioeconomic status (SES) whereby advantaged SES plays an increased role in the positional competition for quality education and quality jobs. For the US, the overall increase in the predicative capacity of parents' education, an indicator of SES, combined with the rise in the direct effect of SES from IALS to PIAAC is an indication that as educational systems are expanding access, they are having difficulties redressing inequalities emanating from the home background. In other words, educational systems are becoming more stratified according to socio-economic background. A similar phenomenon may be occurring in relation to skilled occupations. This raises important implications for equitable access to quality education as well as the changing nature of work practices related to literacy proficiency.