

PIAAC and the South – Is Southering the new Othering? Global Expansion of dominant Discourses on Adult Literacy

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Abstract

Large-scale studies such as Programme for the international assessment of adult competencies (PIAAC) are currently the most influential variant of literacy research. PIAAC is undergoing a process of regional expansion towards countries located in the geographical south. Based on the finding that large-scale studies can create stereotypes about social groups, this contribution examines the extent to which this danger also exists with regard to countries and regions. For doing so we suggest the term southering. Southering brings together the discourses about the South with the concept of othering, introduced by Said (1978). The presentation of the results as tables and world maps can result in exposing countries of the South to a pronounced deficit perspective. The contribution does not pursue the goal of questioning the legitimacy of international studies. Rather, we would like to point out the necessity of exercising due care in the interpretation of corresponding study results.

Keywords: Global South; large-scale assessment; Othering; PIAAC; Southering

Introduction

The last decades have witnessed the growth in importance of international large-scale assessment studies (ILSA). Evidence based policies call for large datasets, which allow



analysing differences between and within countries regarding educational achievements. The discussion about the sustainable development goals (SDG) by the United Nations reinforces the need to measure skills. The authors of this paper themselves are in charge of a national assessment survey and intensively used the datasets of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) for secondary analyses in the last years. We take the high degree of attention towards international large-scale assessments as the starting point to reflect about another aspect of PIAAC. This contribution refers to the regional distribution of the assessment. Looking at the three rounds of the survey one might observe a regional expansion. Participating countries in the first round were mainly located in the geographical North. Meanwhile there is a still small but growing number of countries in the southern part of the globe in PIAAC rounds 2 and 3 (OECD, 2019, p. 19).

Critical positions on ILSA state that literacy should not only be understood as a measurable construct, but even more importantly as a social practice. They also point out that competence measurement might promote deficit views of groups and countries (Evans, 2015; Gorur, 2015). In fact, the current discourse about literacy and about basic competencies is far from being oriented towards emancipatory aspects as Freire captured these terms (Freire, 2014). At the same time, the careful analysis of large datasets can even help to relativize common deficit-oriented stereotypes (Grotlüschen, Riekmann, & Buddeberg, 2015).

Our paper poses the question of whether the danger of labelling groups by stereotypical images can also occur regarding countries or regions, especially regarding countries from the South. We want to investigate whether PIAAC – and this might relate to other international surveys as well – unwillingly reinforce inadequate assumptions about ‘South’ in a process we want to call ‘southering’. Therefore we examine different aspects of data collection and display of findings. However, it is by no means our intention to claim that such processes, which we describe by the term southering, are carried out intentionally. Rather, we want to name aspects in which stereotyping can take place and which therefore require particularly careful handling of data records.

Theoretical framework: South and Othering

To pursue this question we will first outline the position of PIAAC in the context of literacy research. We secondly explore the question of what can be understood as ‘the South’ beyond geographical concepts. Finally, we propose the concept of ‘southering’ as a term, which on the one hand can be related to Said's concept of “othering” and on the other hand to questions of the global South.

Literacy research and PIAAC

One of the first prominent large scale assessments regarding adult skills was the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000) in the 1990s. It was followed by the *Adult Literacy and Life-skills Survey* (ALL) (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005) and most recently by the *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) (OECD, 2013a). The involvement of international organizations like the OECD has been discussed (Ydesen & Grek, 2019) as well as their growing influence on national educational policies (Grek, 2010). As a result ILSAs have become the currently most important tool in research on adult competences (Addey, 2018; Gorur, 2015; Hamilton, 2018). In PIAAC literacy is defined as ‘the ability

to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential' (OECD, 2013a, p. 59). This notion of literacy also implies that literacy is a measurable set of skills. Assessment relies on a hierarchical competence model. Definitions and techniques to investigate literacy stem from northern conventions.

Even critical positions recognize the strengths of ILSAs, in particular the reduction of complexity and an easier understanding of differences between countries and regions (Gorur, 2015). The transformation of a complex fact like literacy into numbers (Hamilton, Maddox, & Addey, 2015) however carries the danger of simplification. Since the early 1990s (Street, 1992), the critical discussion on literacy became more and more visible as the 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS). Different approaches, implementing the New Literacy Studies' ideas, have been used for national studies, e.g. in Scotland (St. Clair, Tett, & MacLachlan, 2010) and Morocco (Erguig, 2017), but they remain the minority compared to repeated French, English and German national studies (Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2011; Harding, 2011; Jonas, 2012;).

The single and internationally comparable notion of literacy as a consequence results in uniform narratives. Addey warns that literacy research via comparative large-scale assessments becomes a 'single story'¹, meaning that the definition becomes self-evident and cannot be scrutinized anymore.

The dominance of large-scale surveys in general and of PIAAC in particular appears to expand from high-income countries in the first round of PIAAC (mainly northern countries) to middle-income countries in the following rounds 2 and 3 (mainly southern countries).² Taking into account OECD's efforts to develop a PISA assessment for low-income countries (PISA for Development, Kaess, 2018), we might take this expansion to the 'South' as a general trend for assessment surveys.

The South

In his article 'The West and the Rest', Stuart Hall (1995), claims that 'west' might sound geographical, but is a concept rather than a natural category. One example for the conceptual character of a geographical issue is the so-called 'Brandt line'. Until the early 1990s, the 'first' and 'second world' used to be the western and eastern side of the iron curtain, all other countries being labelled the 'third world'. A commission led by the former German chancellor Willy Brandt tried to overcome the East-West controversy and to reach a more objective description of different parts of the world. The report suggested a line (the Brandt line) according to gross domestic product per capita, that mostly follows the latitude of the 30th degree North (Wionczek, 1981; Kaess, 2018). Figure 1 displays the Brandt Line, which indicates a North-South division. This division explicitly does not refer to Australia and New Zealand. Despite their geographical position, the two countries in discourse as a whole always belonged to the 'North' (Magallanes, 2015) not necessarily including their indigenous populations.



Figure 1: The Brandt Line (Royal Geographical Society, www.rgs.org)³

Referring to Martinez the notion about the South relies on conventions: 'By convention, the bottom half of a map is South' (2012). Maps have not always been oriented this way. The word 'orientation' points to the Orient (Jerusalem), and not the North. Famous maps between 800 and 1500 AC were round and flat, had Jerusalem in the centre, Asia in the top area, Europe down left and Africa down right. The first compasses were invented in China. They pointed to the South (Needham 1962, p. 229).

There are also discussions about the type of projections used in geographical maps. The well-established Mercator projection leads to an optical reduction of Africa and South America and to an optical valorisation of Europe, North America and Asia (Hruby, Chico Avelino, & Montoya Ayala, 2016). In education, maps mainly play a role in geography. A South-African textbook on critical literacy however also deals with maps in the context of perception of social and global reality. A specific task is 're-drawing the world to challenge maps based on Europe as the centre of the world' (Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, & Newfield, 2014, p. 147).

A very pronounced position taking the South out of the context of physical geography is formulated in the journal 'Global South'. Sparke states that 'South is everywhere, but always somewhere' (2007). According to discourse analyses of 'Global South', North and South have different connotations, e.g. freedom, urbanity and order for the North, the subaltern, rurality and chaos for the South (Pagel, Ranke, Hempel, & Köhler, 2014).

A further – quite extreme – position is not based on empirical data. It still shows a different position in discourse. It is supported by the artist and transgender activist Paul Beatriz Preciado who states that 'the South is not an existing, given place, but a gendered, sexualized, and racialized myth' (Preciado, 2017, p. 1).

Scholars from the discipline of political geography also state that South is not a geographically clear region. Instead, South might also be interpreted as something spatially different. It can be related to areas within nations and carry certain ascriptions. Jansson refers to 'internal orientalism' within the USA (2003, p. 293). With regard to the North and South in the USA, Jansson explains:

This discourse consists of a tradition of representing the American South as fundamentally different from the rest of the United States, and an important strand of this tradition involves

construing ‘the South’ as a region where racism, violence, intolerance, poverty and a group of other negative characteristics reign. In contrast, ‘America’ is understood as standing for the opposite (Jansson, 2005, p. 265).

From Othering to Southering

In the late 1970s, Edward Said published his work on orientalism and the constructs of the ‘east’ and the ‘other’ (1978). He used the term ‘othering’ to clarify how the west imagines and discriminates the orient. Stuart Hall explicitly referred to Said’s work when reflecting about ‘the West and the rest’ (Hall, 1995). Othering is also applied for discourses on migration. (Castro Varela, 2015).

Another discourse about othering appears in the current discussion on sustainable development goals, initiated by the United Nations (Hanemann, 2019). From a decolonizing perspective, this might be seen as an answer within the system of violent modernity (Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, & Hunt, 2015; Andreotti, Stein, Pashby, Susa, & Amsler, 2018). According to Andreotti et al. ‘modernity’s shine is articulated in ways [...] that the very existence of the shiny side requires the imposition of systematic violence on others’ (2018, p. 23).

Jansson identifies the ascription of the ‘south’ as a ‘spatial other’. By using the term internal orientalism, he explicitly refers to Said’s concept. More recently, Jansson’s used the term ‘southering’. He reflects on ‘the structure of the internal orientalist discourse about “the South” (which I will call “southering”)’ (Jansson, 2017, p. 131). In this contribution we will use the term ‘southering’ in order to analyse processes which might result from international measurement of competences.

Corpus for the analysis: PIAAC data exploration tools and country reports

This paper relies on official publications and the data analysis tools provided by the OECD. Scholars focus on the mass media discourse after publication of first and second round of PIAAC results (Hamilton, 2018; Hamilton, Maddox, & Addey, 2015; Yasukawa, Hamilton, & Evans, 2016). The mass media discourse after the second round shows some interesting specifics, especially on Singapore and Greece. Hamilton shows that despite very similar results the development in Singapore is interpreted as a positive trend of educational achievements, while for Greece incapable educational policy and dependency from the European North is reported (Hamilton, 2018). Even though the empirical findings are more or less the same, the overall narratives of a successful, (neo-)liberal Asian economy and an unsuccessful, southern European economy dominate the discourse.

One of the tools that addresses mass media and a larger public is the International Data Explorer (IDE), provided by OECD and Educational Testing Service (ETS). This free online tool leads to fast results for most questions that can be answered with basic descriptive statistics. The IDE also allows generate interactive maps based on PIAAC data. The discussion of maps produced by the IDE follows the question whether the maps support southering procedures.

The second source of information that is comparable across countries consists of PIAAC Policy Briefs or Country Notes for specific countries⁴. The PIAAC overall reports (OECD, 2013a, 2016a, 2019) do not cover the country details and not all countries produced exhaustive country reports. Questions arise, whether there is a country report

produced by the national project managers and their teams and if there are differences regarding structure and content.

Findings: Southering by PIAAC

The techniques displayed here are taken from the PIAAC system, but probably might apply for many other large-scale assessments as well. We do not assume that any of the authors or people in charge intends to discriminate or disconnect countries or populations. Our focus is to investigate how influential the tools are, that shape the process and influence the discourse.

Southering by literacy definitions

PIAAC rounds include more and more countries. For the international comparison, the definition of literacy has to be globally agreed, which referring to Addey (2018) leads to a 'single story' with all the consequences of northern definitions being applied to southern countries (also: Richards, 2014). The notion of literacy not only concerns high-income countries, but also becomes global. The process has a tendency to fix terms for global monitoring, e.g. the new PISA competence domain global competence (Schleicher, 2016). Two recent discourse analyses show the very Western character of this approach (Ledger, 2018; Grotlüschen, 2018).

Southering by assessment instruments

Assessment surveys technically base on item development, translation procedures, scoring rules, scaling and background models. Some of the instruments and procedures are available for further research (e.g. the STEP initiative by the World Bank using PIAAC items or the LEO-PIAAC linking study (Grotlüschen, Buddeberg, Dutz, Heilmann, Stammer, 2019). However the reproduction of surveys requires very specialised knowledge. Hamilton states that an 'industry of workshops' to train scholars for secondary analyses travels around the world (Hamilton, 2018).⁵ Countries from the Global South therefore might feel under pressure either to buy the standard instruments from the northern organizations or to start a long-term capacity-building process to gain their own knowledge.

More recent global processes like the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the requirement of monitoring the achievements generate additional time pressure (through monitoring, reporting and comparison). The consequence is a lack of time for new, globally agreed definitions, theories and instruments. If there is no time for developing own processes the countries and international organisations have to 'borrow' definitions, procedures, instruments from existing surveys. Doing so they confirm the dominance of the North, even if none of the experts and organisations would vote for it, if there were enough time. Time pressure in global procedures might be seen as a technique of southering⁶.

Southering by country income

The OECD works with high and middle-income countries. The World Bank offers classifications by Gross National Income⁷.

- Low-income countries are almost completely African (plus Haiti, Afghanistan, and North Korea).
- Low middle-income countries include several formerly Soviet Union countries, e.g. Ukraine, Moldavia, Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan.
- Some Upper middle-income Countries (e.g. Mexico, Thailand) did participate in PIAAC.
- The high-income countries consist of roughly 100 countries out of which 23 (round 1) plus 7 (round 2) plus 5 (round 3) participated in PIAAC.

PIAAC will presumably expand further among the high-income countries and maybe a few middle-income countries, but – due to the high costs of the survey – not in the low-income countries. Both PIAAC and PISA are currently developed towards an easier and less costly version, which can be administered by middle- and low-income countries. The line between rich and poor countries becomes visible again. High income countries are able to afford PISA, the low-income countries might use PISA for Development (Kaess, 2018).

Southering by league tables

Results of international surveys usually display results in tables, which place the high performing countries on top and low performing countries at the bottom. This type of table is often called ‘league table’. In total 24 countries participated in the first round of PIAAC (2008-2013)⁸. In the second round (2012-2016) other OECD member states (Chile, Greece, Israel, New Zealand, Slovenia, Turkey) and other partners (Jakarta/Indonesia, Lithuania, Singapore) entered the survey. Round 3 (2016-2019) was conducted in Ecuador, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Peru and a second time in the United States.

Italy, Greece and Spain participated in the first (Italy, Spain) or second round (Greece). For Spain (OECD, 2013b) and Italy (OECD, 2013c), the country notes report their position at the lowest end of the literacy scale, but these notes do not report OECD averages. Instead comparisons are made with reference to the averages of the other participating countries in Round 1. ‘Adults in Spain show below-average proficiency in literacy and numeracy compared with adults in the other participating countries.’ (OECD, 2013b, p. 2).

From Round 2 on, comparisons consequently report OECD averages (see the Greek report: OECD, 2016b). Chile, Israel and Turkey participated in round 2. All three countries perform clearly below the OECD average and find themselves at the bottom of the table. Wording and reporting is strictly comparative, both cross-national as well as intra-national (e.g. younger versus older subpopulations). Doing so ‘South’ is created and confirmed between and within European countries. The OECD is geographically widespread and creates its own internal South, mostly not for geographical reasons but according to literacy proficiency as measured with northern instruments and definitions.

The way tables with results are organized changed slightly between PIAAC round 1 and 2. Countries, which entered the survey in the second round, are displayed in a different colour to be identified easily. Compared to the black-coloured countries of Round 1, most of the new countries are visibly at the bottom (South) of all rankings.

Southering by maps

Another way to display survey results are interactive maps. By using the International Data Explorer, maps and charts are easy to produce. Figure 2 shows a map automatically generated using the online tool.

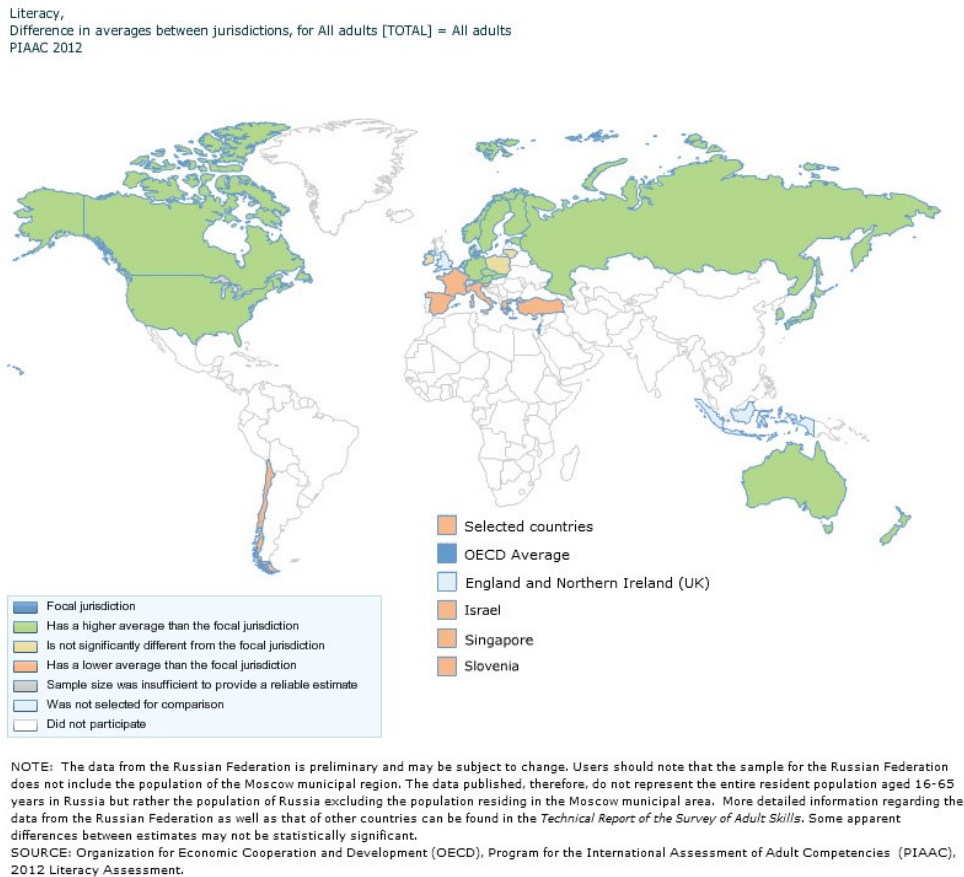


Figure 2: Map produced with the IDE, based on PIAAC data (focal jurisdiction: OECD average)

The legend of the map shows that the focal jurisdiction in this case is the default jurisdiction, namely the OECD average. This value serves as a benchmark. All other countries appear as significantly above (green) or below (red) the focal value. Countries in which the literacy performance does not differ significantly from the average are sketched out in yellow. The map shows that all new countries from Round 2 (e.g. Chile, Greece, Israel, Turkey, Singapore) turn into red colour (significantly below average) while most Anglo-American countries turn to green colour (significantly above average).

The time of entering PIAAC matters. The Northern high-income countries are the early adopters, they started PIAAC, developed the definitions and instruments, they defined the scale and levels and they still are the majority in the participating countries. Consequently, their proficiencies have a strong statistical impact on the averages. The early adopters form the benchmark. The newcomers interpret their results in relation to this benchmark.

The countries involved in adult large-scale assessment differ quite a lot from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) to the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills survey (ALL) and later to PIAAC. The earlier International Survey of Adult Skills (IALS) with

its data collection in the 1990s can also be used as a base for the maps and tables. The OECD did not execute IALS – unlike PIAAC. Therefore, no OECD average can be reported. Figure 3 shows a map based on results from IALS.

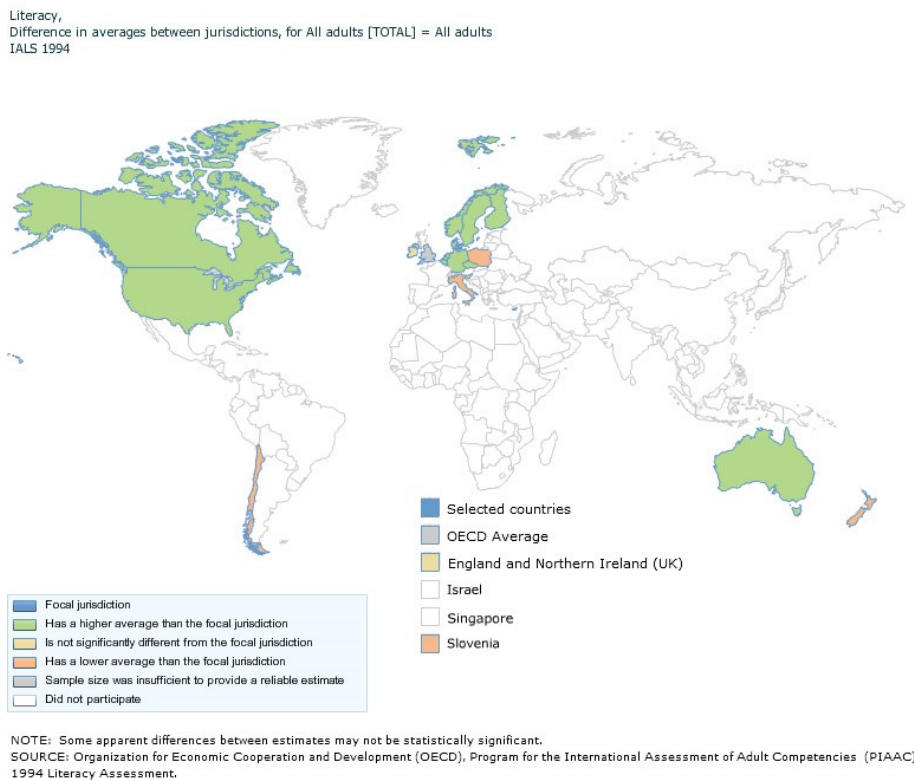


Figure 3: Map produced with the IDE, based on IALS data (no OECD average available, focal jurisdiction: Average of all participating countries)

The focal legislation in figure 3 is the average of the selected countries, i.e. the countries marked with colours in the map. Still, the North-South divide is easily visible: North America and Northern Europe, together with Australia, perform above average and are highlighted in green. Different from in PIAAC, the performance of New Zealand in the mid-nineties was below average, so it is coloured in red. New Zealand seems to have undergone a process from underneath the average to above the average between IALS and PIAAC.

The maps representing PIAAC results clearly indicate that in large areas there had been no PIAAC assessment so far. However, in history there has been a number of local and nation-wide assessments in different countries of the world, from Cuba to Kenya, from the early 1960s to most recent surveys. These initiatives must remain invisible in this form of visual representation.

Southerning by extra sections and additional variables

PIAAC includes assessment in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology rich environments (PS TRE). While in all countries the literacy and the numeracy test was carried out, some countries skipped the problem-solving test, among them Spain, Italy,

France and Cyprus (OECD, 2016b, p. 55). In recent country reports³ there are information about the share of adults in these four countries who opted out of the computer-based assessment of literacy and numeracy and who decided to take the paper-based test instead. This proportion might be a good proxy for reporting low computer skills. Still it separates the non-test-taking countries visibly from those who booked the full arrangement.

Besides the different modules of PIAAC (literacy, numeracy, problem solving) participating countries could add country specific variables into the background questionnaire. The survey is based on an international background questionnaire that allows general international comparison. To a certain extent, countries can add variables of national interest. This gives a certain insight on how important some questions are for a country. In some countries additional variables were included into the interviews, e.g. religion (in Israel), region of origin or skin colour (in the USA).

In several countries from Round 2, religion plays a more important role than in most countries from round 1. Muslim shares of the population can roughly be estimated as follows in some of the Round 2 countries: Turkey (99%) (Federal Foreign Office, 2019), Indonesia (87%) (BPS - Statistics Indonesia, 2012), Singapore (14%) (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Republic of Singapore, 2015). The Arab population in Israel is about one fifth of the inhabitants (20%) (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). As religion has not been a variable in Round 1, the display of league tables and comparisons regarding religion to an OECD average is not possible. Countries with complex religious conflicts like Israel will use the data for internal comparison. Israel even oversampled the orthodox Jews (Charedim) and can draw conclusions based on the different educational systems offered to the different religious subpopulations.

The questionnaire for the assessment in the United States contained an extensive set of variables on health information seeking behaviour and on health and health literacy, as well as on participation in adult basic education. Moreover, questions about skin colour and the region of origin were included (see table 1).

Table 1: PIAAC: Additional questions in the USA

	Are you Hispanic or Latino?
	Which of the groups on this card describes your Hispanic or Latino origin? Choose one or more
01	Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano
02	Puerto Rican or Puerto Rican American
03	Cuban or Cuban American
04	Central or South American
05	Other Hispanic or Latino background

	Which of the groups on this card best describes you? Choose one or more
01	White
02	Black or African American
03	Asian
04	American Indian or Alaska Native
05	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Source: PIAAC Background Questionnaire, retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/final_en_bq.htm

In case the interviewee confirmed that he/she is Hispanic or Latino, the interviewer asked for a very detailed specification. Furthermore, the overall sample of US interviewees was asked whether they would call themselves White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native or Hawaiian. The sample sizes in PIAAC are more or less 5,000 people, out of which a substantial group may be Hispanic, while shares of the subgroups will be too small to allow representative conclusions. Furthermore, the questionnaire connects the questions with people of colour which are different from 'white' people. Findings on literacy by skin colour will probably show the majority of the marginalized, underprivileged, less educated and less prestigious darker subpopulations end at the bottom of the table.

Summary: PIAAC and the South

Findings show, how South is created and re-produced by the presentation of PIAAC results in several ways. The authors would like to point out once again that this is not an intentional procedure, but a side effect of general data analysis. Southering can occur because of the time pressure resulting from supranational agreements which is pushing the less developed countries to adopt techniques and procedures already available by the North. This implies the 'export' of northern definitions and instruments to the South: All definitions and test instruments are used for OECD countries and further partner countries. They also influence the worldwide Global Alliance for Monitoring Learning (UIL/UIS/OECD).

The presentation of rankings or league tables where bottom equals low proficiency compared to OECD average leads to positions of most non-OECD countries below average and thus in the 'South' of the table. This occurred also to southern European geographical areas, e.g. Spain, France, Greece or Italy. In a similar way the production of maps with South at the bottom, coloured in red, connects low performance with southern countries. In addition, the maps can give the impression that there is no literacy research beyond the countries depicted there, thus ignoring earlier tests and campaigns, e.g. the Cuban Literacy Campaign 1961.

The presentation of extra sections for countries, which do not want to afford all parts of the tests and the production of smaller versions of the tests for low- and middle-income countries (e.g. PISA for Development) reinforce the separation between high-income and low-income countries. An intra-national South might be produced by focusing sociodemographic variables, such as religion or skin colour. The subpopulations perceived as 'non-whites' and the book religions claimed as non-Christian may undergo a process of southering within their societies.

Discussion: Southering as new Othering?

To participate in international educational surveys has a number of advantages for the countries in question. Empirical evidence can help to implement educational programs, support the useful allocation of investments and – in the case of PIAAC – rise the awareness towards adult education – the education sector that generally receives far less attention than early childhood education or school education.

The strategy of awareness rising proved to be successful in some cases, like in Germany (Grotlüschen, 2013), in other countries these expectations have been disappointed (Elfert & Walker, 2018; Smythe, 2018a, 2018b). Rising awareness however

also can lead to rising expectations which adult education alone cannot fulfil. Government programs address participants with courses on literacy, install accounting procedures and fund further research. We would suggest that the idea of bringing every single person onto an arbitrarily defined literacy level does not meet the realities of societies. Living with low literacy is possible, especially with a strong connection to a socially supportive group of family, neighbours, colleagues and friends (Buddeberg, 2019).

Another domain regularly covered in large-scale assessment, is numeracy. Like the approach of literacy as a social practice (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000), Yasukawa and colleagues discuss numeracy as a social practice (Yasukawa, Rogers, Jackson & Street, 2018). The approach of decolonizing mathematics is discussed by Nicol and Luneta in South African Soweto (2018). Approaches like these reconsider local knowledge and de-universalizes mathematics. This argument supports the findings in this article. The local or regional practices of literacy can hardly be covered by large-scale surveys, because these surveys for technical reasons have to apply universal definitions and instruments and cannot capture specific regional practices and competences.

This leads back to the question of North and South. We would not claim to renew the well-established terminology of *othering* with a newer and narrower concept. Othering remains a concept that helps uncovering processes of hegemonic discourse, of establishing and maintaining power and of devaluating knowledge. Othering discriminates people, populations, subpopulations and regions by defining them as different from the dominant Northern discourse and from Northern knowledge. We thus use *southering* as a subconcept of *othering*, being narrower in terms of the geographical construct, but still pointing at the enormous relevance of the discourse to establish and maintain Northern hegemony throughout the world.

Hegemonic scientific discourses take place in the global realm of educational assessment, and we subsume them as contributing to a process of southering. Even institutions, which intend to follow emancipatory pathways, like UNESCO institutes and their counsellors, are involved in this procedure. The monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals gives reason closely to observe its directions and discourses⁹.

Notes

¹ Addey referred to Chimamanda Adichie, a novelist born in Nigeria, who gave a TED about 'single stories': www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story. Adichie clarified how 'single stories' are spread by repeating only one paradigm.

² The participating countries in the three rounds are displayed in a world map presented at the launch of PIAAC results from round 3 in autumn 2019: www.slideshare.net/OECD/EDU/skills-matter-additional-results-from-the-survey-of-adult-skills.

³ Figure is retrieved from Royal Geographical Society (www.rgs.org), whereas the wording in the figure can not be changed. Therefore, it is important to note that what is here called 'less developed countries' are often called 'developing countries' in the public discourse.

⁴ OECD provides country specific material online: www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/newcountryspecificmaterial.htm. Specific reports used for this article are part of the reference list.

⁵ Consequently, the implementation of tests and the interpretation of the final test scores are difficult. This is a common feature with many international comparative investigations, e.g. IEA's TIMSS, PIRLS, ICILS, ICCS and OECD's PISA.

⁶ We owe this insight to Camilla Addey, who expressed it at an expert meeting on monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals 4.6 (literacy and numeracy).

⁷ <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519>

⁸ Those countries were Australia, Austria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Flanders (Belgium), France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, Northern Ireland,

Norway, Poland, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden and the United States. Cyprus and the Russian Federation participated as partner states (i.e. non OECD members).

⁹ e.g. the report on Singapore: www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills-Matter-Singapore.pdf

¹⁰ One of the authors is member of this process and this captured in ambiguities.

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