

Workplace learning and reading skills in cross-country comparison

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Differences in workplaces' average opportunities for learning while working may explain cross-country differences in the working populations' acquired levels of occupational skills and competences. The paper investigates the complex relationship between reading skills as measured by PIAAC, opportunities for workplace learning as well as skill and qualification based selection processes working within occupational careers. The relationship between education systems, workplace learning and levels of reading skills mirrors cross-country differences in the overall institutional environments. However, PIAAC does not offer any measure for occupational skills and competences, or for any more situated reading competences in the workplace, which both limits the analytical power of the data set for the research questions at stake.

In a predominately theoretical and conceptual paper, PIAAC results are compared for Denmark, England/Northern Ireland Austria and the Czech Republic. Based on the European Working Condition Survey (EWCS), Denmark and Austria would be expected to provide better condition for workplace learning than England/ Northern Ireland or the Czech Republic. However, PIAAC data does not allow to reproduce that finding, pointing towards limitation in measuring conditions for workplace learning within PIAAC.

Based on a short review of results of reading research, the impact of everyday reading in the workplace is expected to be limited and only relevant for a small group of adult with considerably low levels of reading skills. Close associations between reading in the workplace and measured reading skills are therefore interpreted as the outcome of selection effects where employees with different reading skills are sorted into different types of workplace. Cross-country comparative results support this reasoning.

Both the lack of information on occupational skills and competences (beyond qualification) and the poor measurement of learning conditions in the workplace limit PIAAC's analytical power. Consequently, one can say little about the influence of employment systems and work organisation on achieved levels of reading skills and its relationship to achieved occupational positions from a cross-country comparative perspective. Based on PIAAC, there is a risk to underestimate the particular advantages of pronounced vocational education systems and related occupational labour markets, which are not necessarily mirrored in reading skills. Consequently, cross-country comparative PIAAC results should not be interpreted without considering institutional variability in education and employment systems.

Keywords: workplace learning, reading, reading skills, cross-country comparative