



Research Overview

Assessment Challenges, Contradictions and
Inequities: An analysis of the use of digital
technology and OALCF Milestones

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AlphaPlus is an organization that provides training, services, tools and resources to adult literacy agencies and educators in Ontario and Canada. AlphaPlus' mission is to increase adult literacy skills through the use of digital technologies by supporting educators and stakeholders with research, tools and training.

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Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program Data

Lessons Learned From Analysing the OALCF Use Digital Technology Milestones

Practices Developed When Using the OALCF Milestones

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What is the research about?

In April 2012 Employment Ontario (EO)¹ introduced an extensive curriculum reform into the publicly-funded adult basic education program called Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS). The reform, referred to as the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF)² is described in hundreds of pages of documents that address various aspects of the LBS accountability system, such as service coordination, five goal paths and transitions, learning materials, and assessment. It even proposes a novel pedagogical approach for the LBS program called task-based learning. At the core of the reform is a learning standards document—the OALCF Curriculum Framework. The standards are organized by three levels and six learning domains called competencies. Most competencies also include sub-domains called task groups. The aspect of the reform that will be most actively used, as it gradually becomes mandatory, is a complex assessment scheme comprised of three distinct assessments. However, only one of these assessments, the Milestones, is directly linked to the standards that are the core of the reform—the OALCF Curriculum Framework. The other two assessments are not. (A comprehensive analysis of the complete assessment scheme was beyond the scope of this project but will need to be explicated as the funder’s accountability objectives for LBS develop and are fully implemented.)

Assessment	Aim	Implementation
1. Milestones	Aims to provide data about ‘learner progress’	Currently mandatory (60% of learners’ service plans MUST contain a completed Milestone)
2. Culminating Tasks	Aims to provide data about whether learners complete their ‘goal path’	In 2016-17, MTCU will introduce a target that LBS programs must meet
3. Learner Gains	Aims to measure how much learners ‘gain’ by attending LBS programs Uses methods developed to score and create international adult literacy surveys conducted by the OECD	Test currently under development (once introduced in 2016-17, learners must take this test when they enter <i>and</i> exit LBS programs)

The program funder, the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU), will use assessment results from three tests, along with learner ‘suitability’ criteria to judge whether or not individual programs (service providers) and their teaching and learning (service delivery) is ‘effective’. An individual program’s ‘effectiveness’ rating is used in part to determine funding, which means that learner performance on three different assessments will have a direct impact on program funding. The ‘effectiveness’ category is one of three accountability categories in what is referred to as a Performance Management Framework (PMF). Two additional categories are customer service, which involves measures related to customer satisfaction and service coordination, and efficiency, which involves monitoring enrolment targets. The effectiveness category is weighted most heavily in the ministry’s accountability framework.

This project focused on one of the assessments, the Milestones, the only aspect of the assessment scheme that is currently mandatory and fully developed. LBS programs must show that the majority of learners have completed at least one Milestone. The Milestones, available in both English and French, are a set of 60 test tasks. A set of guidelines in the *Milestones User Guide*³ describe how and when learners should take a Milestone test. Our study concludes that the Milestones and accompanying administration guidelines work counter to and conflict with the ministry's objective for the OALCF to "improve service delivery, learner experiences and learner outcomes" by introducing a series of challenges, contradictions and inequities.

We became interested in the Milestones for a few reasons. First, three previous unpublished reviews⁴ of the OALCF and the Milestones described multiple challenges. These challenges include the overall difficulty of the Milestones for some learners, unfamiliar content, a lack of alignment with program curricula, and confusions about the meaning of test results for learners and learning. Although two of the three reviews were completed during the first year of the OALCF, our study demonstrates that these initial concerns persist. Secondly, the researchers of this study were involved in the development of secondary aspects of the OALCF reform initiative. We witnessed how the main components of the OALCF (i.e. the curriculum framework and Milestone assessments) favoured the interests of accountability and program management over sound pedagogical practice. In addition, we also participated in training events related to the OALCF and heard first-hand the concerns of LBS coordinators and practitioners. They are worried that the resulting data are not representative of individual progress and overall program 'effectiveness'; and as a result, do not fairly and objectively represent their programs and service delivery. They are also worried that the ministry will use the data to make funding decisions that could negatively impact their current funding allocations. A final concern served as an entry point for our investigation. One strategy LBS programs quickly adopted to cope with Milestone challenges and comply with reporting targets was to select and have learners complete the OALCF Use Digital Technology Milestones far more often than other Milestones.⁵ We wanted to know whether the initial reliance on a limited number of Milestones was continuing, and determine *why* assessors were making this choice. An investigation initially focused on digital technology Milestones grew to incorporate a broader investigation of Milestone use in general. In order to fully understand why assessors rely heavily on one set of Milestones, we needed to fully understand why they avoided others. We also wanted to know how assessors use the digital technology and other Milestones, why they make particular choices when working with learners, and the impacts of their use on teaching and learning and 'service quality'.

What the researchers did

To fully explore these questions, we designed a mixed methods approach, combining a document analysis with an examination of both qualitative and quantitative data. Guided by our over-arching questions described above about the use of digital technology Milestones and Milestones in general, we developed a survey, an interview guide and document analysis questions in order to comprehensively investigate the digital technology Milestones and overall Milestone use. The project report⁶ contains copies of all data collection tools and subsequent analysis.

Document analysis

We examined publicly available documents related to the development, use and administration of the OALCF and the Milestones. We also examined the most commonly used Milestones, including all three digital technology Milestones. Included in our analysis are documents and studies related to the conceptual underpinnings of the OALCF. This part of the analysis builds on the researchers'⁷ previous empirical work.

The document analysis was guided by the following questions in order to determine how and why the design of the Milestones contributes to the challenges experienced by assessors and learners:

- What are the conceptual underpinnings of the OALCF and the Milestones?
- How were the concepts and particular methods used in the design of the Milestones?
- What type of information about literacy learning is conveyed by the Milestones?
- What features of the digital technology Milestones make them more appealing to use?

Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data

In addition to the document analysis, we collected both qualitative and quantitative data from three sources: 1) Employment Ontario Information System – Case Management System (EOIS-CaMS), 2) a survey of 181 LBS assessors who administer the OALCF Milestones, and 3) in-depth interviews with 26 program coordinators, instructors and practitioners (many were also assessors) working in six different programs.

We examined EOIS-CaMS data to determine which Milestones are being selected and completed most often, and to determine whether certain programs and learners experience more challenges than others.

The survey focused on program assessment practices in general, assessors' use of the digital technology and other Milestones, and their interpretations of testing results. We explored similar topics during the interviews in a more in-depth and conversational manner. We compiled results from our survey, and

analysed transcripts of our interviews. Both the survey and interviews involved participants who represented the EO regions and the LBS Sectors and Streams. Interview data and assessors' comments from the survey were used to help us understand the particular strategies used to select Milestones in general and digital technology Milestones in particular. As mentioned, complete details of the analysis and methodology, including copies of all data collection tools can be found in the project report.

Findings from the survey and interviews are not generalizable to all practitioners/instructors and coordinators who administer the Milestones, nor are they statistically representative of all programs and program practices. However, our findings do convey a compelling and rigorous portrayal of practices, concerns and pedagogical issues with the Milestones, particularly since much of the data are from those who have the most experience using the Milestones and witness their impacts on learners. Although we did not include learners in the study, practitioners provided tremendous insight into the learning experiences and responses of learners to the Milestones. Findings from EOIS-CaMS data however, would represent more wide-spread practices, as these data are generated from provincial reports submitted by all programs.

We view the Milestones, similar to any assessment or text, as a situated literacy practice. This means they are situated in a very specific context and have been created to fulfil certain purposes. Milestone texts convey meaning and information in a particular way. What learners do to ascertain and demonstrate their understanding in the testing situation is not necessarily what they do outside the testing situation, even when responding to similar texts. The literacy skills, knowledge, strategies and insights used when completing the various Milestone test tasks are also situated, and do not automatically transfer from the testing situation to everyday use. Our perspective is informed by nearly three decades of research and theorizing about literacy as a social and situated practice.

Document analysis revealed the primary purpose of the Milestones is to provide data to MTCU rather than assess learning

Administration guidelines disconnect learners and instructors from the assessment process

Only designated assessors can access all 60 Milestones. This prevents instructors and practitioners who are not assessors from analysing their content in order to make professional decisions about their use with particular learners, and to adequately prepare their learners. Guidelines also describe how assessors should restrict the way they discuss the test with learners and provide support before, during and after the test. They are not permitted to provide interpretive information related to content and test instructions, nor are they permitted to provide relevant details about test results to learners or their instructors that could be

used to help learners complete additional Milestones. Administration guidelines claim the restrictions are necessary in order to achieve ‘objective’ and ‘reliable’ results. However, as will be described, there are numerous reasons why this aim is unachievable, including the design of the most commonly used and reported Milestones.

Milestone results are primarily used for reporting not to support learning and learners

Milestone results are not used to decide whether a learner will pass a course, achieve a goal, or transition into further education and training. In fact, guidelines advise assessors not to rely on the Milestones for this type of information. The guidelines also state that learners must wait six weeks before attempting to re-do a Milestone that was not successful. Although a different Milestone can be substituted, this does not help a learner who is experiencing difficulties with the testing process overall. The required waiting period is punitive. The wait period means that learners will likely forget the content and questions in the Milestone. During the wait period, if learners achieve their LBS goals but do not complete a Milestone, their progress does not count in the system. It could also compel programs to intentionally hold back a learner to ensure there is a reportable Milestone. Assessors strive to avoid this situation, they explained, by modifying or ignoring some Milestone guidelines.

The Milestones also have a contradictory value. They are a low-stakes test for adult learners since their results are not used to indicate program achievements. However, they are used as an indicator of program performance in determining funding allocations. This makes them a high-stakes test for LBS programs. Assessors must ‘sell’ the value of the Milestones to learners and explain why they are subjected to testing that has no impact on their individual goals and program achievements.

MTCU has not developed adequate testing accommodations⁸ for learners with learning disabilities, mild developmental disabilities, vision challenges, or other disabilities. There is no ASL version of the Milestones to accommodate Deaf learners. Simple modifications and adaptations to test tasks, such as increasing the font size for learners with vision challenges, are not permitted.

Milestones were developed using theories of population skill distribution not individual skill development

The Milestones were designed to provide MTCU with ‘objective’ and ‘reliable’ data that could be used to evaluate program ‘effectiveness’ and to make a direct connection between LBS program outcomes and the results of large-scale international adult literacy surveys such as IALS, IALSS and PIAAC⁹. Ontario is the first and only known jurisdiction in the world to have reformulated some of the international survey testing methods for educational and pedagogical purposes, and then mandated its use within an

accountability framework. Our analysis indicates that there are important reasons this approach has not been adopted elsewhere. Making a direct connection between literacy program performance outcomes and results from international adult literacy surveys is an unachievable goal.

International surveys were not designed to measure learning

International surveys such as IALS, IALSS and PIAAC were designed to test the distribution of specific cognitive skills (i.e. certain types of reading and computation) in the population. They were not designed to assess individuals' gains in basic literacy over time. International surveys developed and continue to use a unique model of reading called information-processing. This approach was not derived from theories about learning to read, and does not align with school-based literacy testing or standardized reading tests. It is distinct from the reading comprehension model used to teach reading, and on which most published texts and student instructional supports are based. There has been little or no research to ascertain whether the information-processing model is used outside of testing situations.

Survey methods do not consider the skills and abilities of those with low levels of education

Further, the international surveys were not designed to analyse the cognitive abilities of many learners attending LBS programs: adults who have less than 8 to 10 years of formal education. In fact, the surveys dismiss the literacy skills and abilities of this population. This can be seen in the survey's approach to content development. Texts are written at a Grade 8 level and do not contain recognizable symbols, place names and organization names, making them challenging for adults with low levels of education who depend on these cues. Transposing some of the international survey methods into an educational context required significant adaptations and modifications to overcome their limitations in the context of an educational program. In addition, in order to reformulate the methods for adults who have less than 8 to 10 years of formal education new methods had to be introduced, while others such as basic content development principles and the focus on measuring task difficulty rather than individual skill development were maintained. This results in the creation of a unique methodological approach for the OALCF and the Milestones, one that is different from both the information-processing approach used in the international literacy surveys, and the reading comprehension approach used in most standardized reading tests and published instructional materials.

The OALCF and Milestones isolate LBS from the provincial education system and learners from relevant pedagogy

What this means is the OALCF and the Milestones operate in their own unique way. They do not have a strong methodological connection to the international literacy surveys or to the Essential Skills framework, which also informs the OALCF. Nor do the Milestones align with a series of standardized

spin-off tests developed using some of the international literacy survey methods, such as the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), Prose, Document, Quantitative (PDQ), PIAAC's Education and Skills Online, and Essential Skills for Employment and Education (ESEE). This misalignment is important to understand, although it was beyond the scope of the study, since all of the spin-off tests have been or are currently being considered for the learner gains measure in the PMF. Results from the Milestones will not relate to results from one of the standardized learner gains measures.

More importantly, the introduction of a distinct OALCF framework and assessment also means that the LBS curricular accountability system is not aligned to Ontario's provincial education system and its literacy curriculum. The curricular disconnection isolates the LBS system from the broader provincial education system, and results in a series of pedagogical limitations, challenges and contradictions that restrict learning, and can actually prevent learners with the least educational resources from accessing meaningful, relevant and pedagogically appropriate curricula. The unique framework and assessments are also disconnected from the literacy practices associated with employment and personal day-to-day practicalities and pursuits. This means that individual programs are engaged in day-to-day pedagogical activities involving the development of skills, knowledge, strategies and insights that are different from the way the Milestones assess. While learners with higher levels of education can more readily work with the differences between assessments and actual learning activities, those with lower levels of education encounter serious challenges.

Unique features of digital technology Milestones

Our analysis of the digital technology Milestones revealed several features that account for their popularity among LBS assessors: they respond to learners' abilities, are meaningful in learners' lives and support their program goals. These features represent sound pedagogical practice needed to implement 'learner-centred, goal-directed and transition-oriented' outcomes in LBS programs.

Unlike many other Milestones, the digital technology Milestones allow learners and instructors to choose and control the content, context and complexity of the test task. Learners are directed to perform actual activities in a digital environment. Their abilities are assessed using a simple performance checklist, and not a series of follow-up test-questions. These features situate the digital technology Milestones in learners' lives and experiences. As a result, these assessments are more meaningful and relevant for both learners and instructors than Milestones which only approximate real-life literacy tasks and use a prescriptive questioning approach. Because the digital technology Milestones are aligned with tasks that could occur outside the testing situation, completing one of these tasks in a testing situation is a solid measure of how well learners could possibly perform outside of the LBS program. They also more

accurately reflect the kinds of outcomes that LBS programs are designed to foster, and that LBS instructors spend time trying to have learners achieve.

The very features that make the digital technology Milestones compatible with teaching and learning make them ‘unreliable’ for offering comparisons and for providing ‘objective’ data about programs and learners in vastly different contexts across the province. However, the lack of standardized content in these Milestones offers a **better** measure of program effectiveness than standardized content and prescriptive questioning, which is far removed from the ‘learner-centred, goal-directed and transition-oriented’ outcomes that LBS programs are mandated to provide.

Data from assessors and EOIS/CaMS revealed Milestones are used to demonstrate compliance not progress

Our analysis of data from EOIS-CaMS for 2013-2014 and our own survey of 181 assessors revealed that Milestones are used to prove compliance with MTCU reporting requirements. They are not used to assess learning or supply pedagogically useful information for teaching. Two years after they were introduced, the tendency to select a limited number of Milestones persists. Our findings indicate that these tendencies are a direct result of the limitations of the Milestones.

Only 1.6 Milestones were used for each learner in the LBS system. Their use surpasses the target set by MTCU. However, the Milestone system, with its 60 test tasks, was designed to show progress over time, suggesting that a series of Milestones would likely be completed by a learner. Showing less than two completed Milestones on learner plans indicates that they are not being used to show progress over time. In addition, many assessors avoid using Milestones that are designed to assess reading, writing and math skills, the primary focus of LBS programs (i.e. Find and Use Information, Communicate Ideas and Information and Understand and Use Numbers). Instead, they rely on Milestones from other OALCF Competencies, such as Use Digital Technology and Manage Learning. These OALCF Competencies and their accompanying Milestones are not as comprehensively developed as the primary competencies and Milestones. By making this choice, assessors bypass the levelling system, decontextualized content and unique approach to devising test questions.

Assessors limit their Milestone selections overall, relying on only four Milestones out of sixty for one-third (33%) of all learner plans. Three of the four are digital technology and manage learning Milestones. Our interview and survey data suggests that assessors and instructors select and administer these Milestones for the following reasons: they are familiar with the content and thus can predict if a student is ready to complete it; the unique features of the digital technology Milestones give assessors and instructors control over content, context and complexity; and to ensure a learner plan has a completed Milestone at intake or very soon afterwards.

The most commonly-selected Milestone is from the Manage Learning Competency, Milestone 57 (Begin to manage learning). It is selected on 19% of learner plans¹⁰. This Milestone directs test-takers to complete a self-assessment related to goal-setting and managing their own learning. Its popularity may be due to the fact that the ESKARGO¹¹ resource, used in many community-based and school board programs, describes how to integrate this Milestone into intake and orientation activities. This approach helps to ensure that learner plans have a completed Milestone. However, Milestone 57 is completed only 5% of the time. The low completion rate suggests this Milestone is being used as a placeholder to open a file within EOIS-CaMS. It also suggests that learners may be having difficulty completing the Milestone. Using it as part of an already lengthy intake and registration process may also pose a barrier for learners working at a basic level who need time to learn the content, format and expected responses required to complete the Milestone. The pressure to report a completed Milestone may lead to practices and decisions that are not always responsive to learners.

Only one of the four most commonly selected Milestones is a reading related Milestone from the Find and Use Information Competency. Milestone 1 directs test-takers to read a classified ad and email. Although it is selected on 7% of learner plans, it is completed at less than half the rate. The difference between selection and completion indicates that learners are having difficulty completing Milestone 1, which is deemed to be the easiest reading related Milestone in the system. Challenges experienced by learners when attempting Milestone 1 indicate that the Milestones do not adequately consider the literacy abilities of all learners.

Why assessors rely on digital technology Milestones

Milestone 54 (Log into a user account) and Milestone 55 (Conduct an Internet search) made-up nearly 20% of all completed Milestones on learner plans. Both are quick to administer and easy to understand by the learner and assessor, since the assessor can choose the text used for testing purposes and can make sure that the content, context and complexity of the activity reflects learners' literacy abilities as well as their true goals and reasons for being in a LBS program. Informants using these Milestones also told us that they can be used to support blended learning and to integrate digital technology with other learning tasks, particularly those related to a learner's employment goals. In addition, they provide assessors and instructors with some useful information about literacy use outside the testing situation, and information about skill development; informants did not describe similar useful results for other Milestones. Although the digital technology Milestones can more easily be integrated into teaching and learning, their usefulness as tools to inform instruction and measure progress is extremely limited because they do not cover a range of digital literacy skills, knowledge and strategies in a sequential and predictable manner.

Why assessors don't rely on other Milestones

Our survey and interview data indicates that the Milestones are confusing to administer and are either too difficult or too simplistic for learners. Informants mentioned that learners who had difficulty completing the tasks were confused by the instructions and unfamiliar with the content and kinds of questions that Milestones ask. Learners who found the Milestones too simplistic were doing well academically and were more accustomed to the complex and comprehensive reading-comprehension approach to assessment. Assessors told us that Milestones are disconnected from learner goals, program purposes and the existing curriculum being used in the program, so they lack meaning and relevance for learners and cannot provide useful information to assess learner progress. An overwhelming majority (89%) of survey respondents use other resources for assessments and curriculum development. This means that the OALCF Curriculum Framework and Milestones do not serve as a key source of pedagogical guidance and support and are used only to comply with reporting requirements. Colleges have maintained the use of their secondary school equivalency framework and accompanying curriculum, school boards devise curriculum in line with secondary school entry requirements, and many programs continue to use the outcomes and assessments previously developed for LBS.

Some assessors modify or disregard Milestone administration and reporting requirements

In order to comply with the requirement that they have a reportable Milestone for each learner, some assessors said they modified or disregarded Milestone administration and reporting guidelines. Some of their strategies include: not entering data in EOIS-CaMS until a learner is ready to complete a Milestone, not waiting six weeks to re-administer unsuccessfully completed Milestones, not reporting incomplete Milestones, integrating Milestones into learning activities, developing duplicates of the Milestones so learners can have a practice test, not reporting all selected Milestones, administering Milestones in American Sign Language (ASL), providing learners with detailed instructions, allowing learners to use dictionaries and glossaries, and administering Milestones during intake and registration. Their decision to disregard or modify the administration and reporting requirements mitigates potential negative impacts of unsuccessful completion on the program and individual learners. Assessors also make these decisions to prevent a learner from experiencing an unsuccessful completion or failure. Strategies also demonstrate how Milestones are detached from program learning. The only way to adequately prepare some learners is to develop a duplicate that mimics the content, format and test questions.

Do all learners face the same challenges with Milestones?

The Milestone design makes them too difficult for learners with lower levels of education and too easy for learners with higher levels of education. Administration guidelines likely contribute to this disparity. College programs, which have learners with the highest levels of education and mostly learners with academic goals, have consistently higher completion rates compared to selection rates. Community-based programs, which have learners with lower levels of education and far more learners with employment and independence goals, have consistently lower completion rates. (Similar to community-based programs, school boards have learners with lower levels of education but they also have more learners with academic goals; their selection and completion rate differences are mixed.)

Our analysis indicates that even the digital technology Milestones are more challenging for learners with the least formal education. When we looked closely at digital technology selection and completion rates, well-educated learners have consistently higher completion rates compared to their selection rates. But learners with the least education are not completing digital technology Milestones at the same rates they are selected. Since the content, context and complexity can be controlled, it is likely that the testing process and administration guidelines are contributing to the challenges experienced by learners with the least formal education.

Are all programs equally affected by these challenges?

We asked about a variety of work responsibilities and time pressures, as we were interested in learning more about the overall impacts of curriculum reform. Overall, when counting all responses across four time categories, the majority (61%) of responses from 175 assessors indicate they are feeling time pressure. Half of the total number of responses fell in the ‘barely enough time’ category, and an additional 11% of responses fell in the ‘absolutely no time’ category. A smaller portion of responses (38%) fell in the ‘enough time’ category, and only 1% of responses were in the ‘more than enough time’ category. These responses indicate a general sense of time pressure, with one-tenth feeling acutely under pressure to complete daily work responsibilities. Differences between sectors indicate that community-based programs, and to a slightly lesser extent school boards, are experiencing the impacts of the OALCF differently compared to colleges. The OALCF curricular reforms and accompanying reporting requirements exacerbated existing differences and inequities in work load and responsibilities.

All LBS programs have devised various ways to incorporate Milestone testing into their program activities. For example, interview data revealed how a large college program with substantial resources readily fit the Milestones into existing curriculum and program delivery, but a small community-based program that develops individualized curriculum for every learner encounters more challenges. Differences in the amount of effort, time and resources needed to incorporate the Milestones demonstrate

their inequitable impacts, which land particularly heavily on programs mandated to work with adults at the most basic levels.

A college program readily fit Milestones into current curriculum and courses with the least disruption

Program staff from a large college program described the process they undertook to limit the Milestones' impact on their program and maintain the integrity of their existing secondary level equivalency curriculum. All of the coordinators, assessors and instructors met to talk about how to meet OALCF reporting requirements with the least impact. The program hired an additional support staff member whose sole function was to meet the increased reporting requirements. Milestones were integrated into existing course modules with minimal disruption to existing program learning activities and structures. Learners were also told that the Milestones were required by the program funder and their results would not be used by the program to evaluate their progress. This approach not only left the curriculum intact but alleviated any anxiety that could be associated with test results. The program also developed administrative protocols that shifted the extra work associated with the Milestones away from the instructors to administrative staff. The college program was able to keep Milestones separate from teaching and learning.

In general, college programs have several advantages over small community-based and school board programs in addition to their size. Not only are they relatively large, with several instructors and administrative staff, they also work with learners who have the most formal education. These programs also focus almost exclusively on two academic goal paths—postsecondary and apprenticeship. College programs also use a formal curriculum that leads to a secondary level equivalency certificate. Their curriculum has a direct connection to the provincial secondary curriculum. With the introduction of the OALCF, the college curriculum remained intact and college staff did not have to do additional work to alter their existing curriculum to accommodate the OALCF and the Milestones. They are insulated from the effects of the unique OALCF curriculum and maintain their explicit connection to the provincial education system. Their learners are also insulated from the effects of the Milestones since they are overly simplistic compared to the more in-depth and comprehensive secondary school curriculum.

A smaller program does far more work to accommodate the Milestones

In comparison to the college example, a small community-based program with one staff person who is the coordinator, assessor and practitioner experienced the impact of the OALCF very differently. Without the option of discussion with colleagues, she had to figure out how to meet reporting requirements and accommodate the OALCF while still maintaining her existing curricula that is individualized for each learner. Without a formal curriculum already in place that could be used for groups of students, she had to

do far more work, compared to the instructors in the college program, to figure out how the OALCF could be integrated. She decided not to rely on the digital technology Milestones and Milestone 57 simply to fulfil reporting requirements, and developed an approach more in line with the way Milestones are described in the *Milestones User Guide* integrating them directly into her individualized planning process. She attempts to use a Milestone to represent learner progress as described. However she encounters a series of challenges: the content of the Milestones is not aligned to individual goals, the difficulty is not aligned to learners' abilities and their individualized curricula, and she must spend time preparing students to complete a Milestone instead of program learning. In addition, some learners completed program learning activities and gained acceptance into further education but were not able to complete a Milestone. She then questioned her ability to prepare learners adequately. The instructor/assessor was also pressured by her Employment Training Consultant (ETC) to administer Milestones soon after learners entered the program to ensure she met Milestone reporting targets. But this contradicted Milestone guidelines, which state that the Milestone should be given after a period of program learning in order to indicate progress. It also led her to question if she should continue to follow the guidelines, placing her in a vulnerable position. She could ignore the guidelines and follow the advice of her ETC or follow the guidelines and ignore her ETC.

Her attempt to comply with Milestone guidelines is more confusing for the learner since it is challenging to find a Milestone that matches a learner's goal. It places far more emphasis on the Milestone and its testing function, which increases learner anxiety. Overall, the attempt to make the Milestone process pedagogically meaningful demands a great deal of time that takes away from time that needs to be spent with learners to help them meet their goals. It is also more confusing for her as a professional. Although an incomplete Milestone had absolutely no connection to a learner's program achievements and readiness to transition into further education, it led her to question her own professional expertise and judgement. Finally, her attempt to align her approach to the Milestone guidelines put her in a vulnerable position with her ETC who was urging her to ignore the guidelines. Her attempt to re-organize her planning and program delivery processes to accommodate the Milestones as suggested leads to far more work, creates confusion and unnecessary anxiety for learners, places her in a vulnerable position with the program funder, leads her to question her expertise and takes away from the limited time she has to support learners in her program.

Conclusion: Working Counter to LBS objectives

The OALCF and the Milestones are a compliance-centred curriculum reform and not a learner and learning-centred reform. The reform prevents programs from demonstrating actual progress and learner

accomplishments, which directly impacts and conflicts with the aim of the LBS system to “ensure accountability to all stakeholders”.¹²

Based on the findings, what is most apparent is a series of inequitable impacts that privilege some programs, like the college program described in this study, but are detrimental to others, like the small community-based program described. The inequitable impacts are the result of inequitable program resources, diverse program contexts and distinct learner profiles. The inequities undermine the ability of the LBS system to work in a coordinated way, and also make it harder for some programs to “support learners’ successful transitions” compared to others.

Also apparent are a series of inequitable impacts that are detrimental to adult learners with the least amount of education, including those with disabilities who are not able to access appropriate testing accommodations. This makes the Milestones an unfair assessment, as they advantage learners with higher levels of education and disadvantage those with lower levels of education and with disabilities. This undermines the ability of programs to be learner-centred and “respect learners and provide a supportive learning environment.”

The Milestones are also unfair because they are not assessing what is actually taught and learned in programs to help learners meet their goals. They introduce a novel testing approach that is distinct from commonly used standardized tests in the education system. They also introduce a novel pedagogy derived in part from international literacy surveys, which is distinct from the predominant reading comprehension approach, most published instructional materials and the expertise of instructors. In essence, **programs are being held accountable for things they don’t actually do**. Not only does this undermine fundamental principles of accountability and fair testing, it also undermines the ability of programs to follow sound adult education and adult literacy pedagogy and their ability to deliver “quality instruction.” The exclusion of learners from the assessment process conflicts with the LBS principle to “include learners in decisions that affect them.”

A stated aim of LBS is to “provide literacy services to those most in need of them” and “provide high quality instruction and services to adults who lack the literacy and basic skills they need to achieve goals”, yet the OALCF Milestones are derived from a theoretical framework that was not designed to assess individual literacy learning and basic skill development, and that does not recognize the skills of adults who have less than 8 –10 years of formal education. This fundamental contradiction raises questions about whether LBS remains accessible to adult non-readers and those with the least educational resources.

The adaptations and modifications made to the underlying theoretical framework result in a unique OALCF Curriculum Framework that is distinct from the international literacy surveys and provincial K-

12 literacy development curriculum. This undermines the ability of the LBS curricular system to be “linked to the broader education system and labour market”. The LBS curricular system does not in fact “complement the broader education and training system” but is detached from it. It also means the aim to connect the LBS system with international literacy survey results was not met.

MTCU’s emphasis on the compliance function of the Milestones over learners and learning has led to the development of yet another barrier for those who already experience and have experienced multiple education and learning barriers, a direct contradiction of the stated aims of the LBS program. It also suggests that fiscal concerns are more important than the ministry’s claim that the aim of LBS is to “provide opportunities to make it easier for individuals to improve their skills through education and training.”¹³

Mis-steps and next steps

Three fundamental mis-steps were taken when the OALCF was conceived and developed. Current MTCU policy analysts need to recognize the far-reaching impacts of these decisions, many of which were made before the full integration of LBS into Employment Ontario. Acknowledging the mis-steps can also inform future work and next steps related to the development and use of curricular accountability measures in the ministry’s performance management framework. The mis-steps are

1. An attempt to develop a standardized assessment and performance evaluation system for a **non-standardized and highly diverse LBS program** with inequitable resources, learners with highly varied educational experiences, learners with disabilities, sectors with distinct goal path profiles requiring diverse curricular supports, a wide range of program participation intensity and duration levels, and a range of professional standards for instructors
2. The decision to transpose international literacy survey methods developed for the purpose of analysing the distribution of skills in the population into an educational context and a system designed to support basic literacy development
3. The development of a highly complex and demanding assessment scheme comprised of three distinct approaches to assessment, without consistent oversight, review, and analysis including rigorous validation and reliability processes.

While much of this research concludes that the OALCF Milestones in their current form works counter to established educational practices and LBS objectives. The research also reveals how one aspect of the Milestones, the digital technology Milestones, offers several important insights that could be used to inform the development of a curricular accountability system that support learners and learning.

As next steps in the future of the OALCF, the researchers strongly recommend a comprehensive review of the OALCF Curriculum Framework and Milestones. Until this review is complete, results from Milestones and other mandated assessments should not be used to make funding decisions.

This review needs to consider whether LBS has the resources and capacity to develop, implement and continuously support a complex standardized assessment scheme requiring on-going validation and reliability analysis. Rigorous, reliable and fair standardized assessments are expensive to develop and maintain. Further, one has to question if a single standardized approach is even possible in such a diverse and non-standardized LBS program.

If curricular accountability measures continue to be used, key mechanisms should be non-standardized and reflect the array of literacy and numeracy practices that learners develop in programs, reflecting what programs actually do. Their development should involve front-line practitioners and adult literacy learning experts working directly with MTCU as equal partners. A mechanism to involve learners in a meaningful way in the process also needs to be considered. The expertise and experiences of front-line practitioners need to be recognized by including them in on-going consultations about the adjustments and further implementation of a Milestone system so that it is truly learning- and learner-centred.

This research also revealed that the design differences and appeal of the digital technology Milestones provide important insights that could inform such adjustments. A truly learner-centred process means instructors and learners are directly involved and have control over content, context and complexity. Their direct involvement would help ensure that the Milestones

- Contain content that is familiar and relevant to individual learners at an appropriate development level, including recognizable images, symbols, place and organization names, etc.
- Use follow-up responses and test questioning approaches aligned with goal paths and learner goals
- Have a direct connection to teaching and learning, and
- Become an assessment that supports learning and meaningful conversations about literacy development.

Last but not least, the participants in this study expressed a need for more digital technology tasks. This research supports the further development of the concept of digital literacy and digital curricular supports that are integrated with reading and communication and numeracy. Literacy should be looked at in a much more integrated way that acknowledges reading and working in digital environments. Any adjustments to the OALCF and the Milestones need to accommodate this reality.

Endnotes

¹ For an overview of Employment Ontario, refer to <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/employmentontario/>

² For an overview of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) refer to <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/employmentontario/>

³ Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2012) *Milestones User Guide*. Available from MTCU.

⁴ The following three reviews of the OALCF and Milestones were examined:

i) AlphaPlus (2013) *Review of Three OALCF Components*. Unpublished report available from MTCU.

ii) Barber, R. (2014) *Provincial Perspective on the Success of OALCF Implementation, Reporting of Learner Progress, Data Integrity and the LBS Performance Management System*. Unpublished report available from Author.

iii) Mazzulla, M., & Geraci, K. (2013) *Milestones Review Project: Research Report*. Unpublished report available from MTCU.

⁵ A preliminary review of the Milestones indicated that the three digital technology Milestones were being selected over 20% of the time. See page 15 in Mazzulla, M., & Geraci, K. (2013) *Milestones Review Project: Research Report*. Available from MTCU.

⁶ The full report is available for download at <http://www.alphaplus.ca>

⁷ Previous work completed includes the following:

i) Pinsent-Johnson, C. (2015) “From an International Adult Literacy Assessment to the Classroom: How Test Development Methods are Transposed into Pedagogy”. In M. Hamilton, B. Maddox and C. Addey (Eds.), *Literacy as Numbers: Researching the Politics and Practices of Literacy Assessment Regimes*. London, UK: Cambridge University Press.

ii) Pinsent-Johnson, C. (2014) “The Coordination of Adult Literacy Policy and Pedagogy to Ensure Productivity in a Knowledge Economy”. In D. Plumb (Ed.) *Proceedings of the 33rd Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE)* (pp. 189-194). Available at <http://journals.msvu.ca/ocs/index.php/casae2014/CASAE14/paper/viewFile/64/42>

iii) Sturm, M. (2013) *Voices Speak to the Data: Feedback from Participants in the PIAAC On-line Field Trial*. Available at <http://alphaplus.ca/en/web-tools/online-publications-a-reportsgroup1/voices-speak-to-the-data.html>

⁸ Although comprehensive accommodation protocols for specific learner groups and disabilities have not been developed, some of the Milestone administration guidelines were modified slightly to permit assessors to read instructions and test questions aloud. Test task content remains intact.

⁹ The three adult literacy surveys conducted by the OECD are the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Literacy Competencies (PIAAC).

¹⁰ However, Milestone 57 is not commonly selected in Francophone programs.

¹¹ What is commonly referred to as ESKARGO is a set of resources designed to supplement the OALCF Curriculum Framework. The materials can be found in the following two documents: 1) OALCF Implementation Strategy Resource (ISR) and 2) Embedded Skills, Knowledge and Attitudes Reference Guide for Ontario (ESKARGO) at <http://www.lbspractitionertraining.com/oalcf/eskargo-a-oalcf-implementation-strategy-resource>

¹² Refer to page 5 for all references to LBS objectives unless noted otherwise in Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (2014). *LBS Service Provider Guidelines*. Available http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/lbs_2014_2015_service_provider_guidelines_sdb_approved.pdf

¹³ Refer to page 2, *LBS Service Provider Guidelines*.