

Submission to the House of Commons
Standing Committee on Literacy

*Learning from the Swedes:
Policy options for enhancing literacy skills of Canadians*



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This submission presents preliminary findings and observations based on a three year research project designed to gain an understanding of factors that account for the differences between adult literacy levels in Canada and Sweden, as reported in the International Adult Literacy Survey. This qualitative research compares adult education from a social policy perspective in the two countries. It examines policy and policy consistency at three levels: planning, implementation and personal experience. Policymakers must understand the realities of the individuals who are at the receiving end of policy in order to achieve successful outcomes.

The research is funded by a three-year grant from the Valuing Literacy Strategic Initiative of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in April 2002. Research sites in Sweden were established in September 2002 and data collection will take place in April and May 2003. Data collection in Canada has been taking place since October 2003 and will continue through 2004. The findings will be discussed at regional meetings across Canada in 2004 in order to identify relevance for Canada.

Nayda Veeman has worked as an instructor and program coordinator in the field of adult education since 1980. She has been a consultant on projects in China and Tanzania. During her eleven years as Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Literacy Network, she supervised several studies of literacy issues and played a leading role in the establishment of family literacy in Saskatchewan. Nayda became interested in explaining the IALS results as a result of the many public presentations that she gave on the topic where she was frequently asked why Swedish IALS were better than the Canadian results. In addition, socioeconomic status and level of schooling completed had less impact on literacy levels in Sweden than in Canada.

Nayda left her job in 2000 in order to investigate these questions and she is currently a doctoral student in Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan under the supervision of Professors Keith Walker and Angela Ward. Names and addresses of the advisory committee members are attached.

This submission begins with comparisons of the two countries under several broad categories and concludes with recommendations. It is preliminary in nature as the research is currently in progress and public discussion of the findings will not occur for several more months.

Adult Education as a Demonstrated Government Priority

In Sweden, adult education has been a government priority for a very long time. In the September 2002 national election, the party that promised lower taxes was soundly defeated. Milner (2002) explained that Swedes are actively engaged in the political life of their country and are happy with the quality of community life that they have. The promotion of democratic values and an understanding of the mutuality of responsibility between individual and community are explicit goals of the Swedish education system.

- National guidelines and funding for adult education have been provided to all municipalities throughout Sweden since 1957 for implementation at the local and regional level. The goal was to compensate those who had been denied high school education because of the old school system. Special programs are offered for immigrants and for those with disabilities. Immigration has become a significant factor over the past twenty

years. Regional funding allocations reflect regional needs, e.g., number of unemployed, number of immigrants, regional infrastructure.

- One year study leave was available to all workers, starting in 1974; in 1992 this was expanded to include basic education as well as more directly vocational training.
- In 1992, the Swedish government introduced the Adult Education Initiative as a response to high unemployment.
- Sweden's population is approximately nine million people with an area roughly two-thirds that of the province of Saskatchewan. The population density is 22 persons per square km.
- \$507 million new funding was allocated by the national government annually for five years (1992 – 2002), approximately \$56 per every Swede.
- This funding was primarily for delivery (and related administrative costs) of adult education for 100,000 individuals per year.
- The centre for training of adult educators at Linköping University provides both research and academic training for practitioners.
- National funds are largely for delivery of programs, subsidies and student loans rather than promotion

In Canada, adult education seems to be an afterthought for the federal government. This is even more true following the signing of the Labour Market agreements with the provinces.

- A patchwork of delivery means that for Canadians, access to adult education is very much happenstance – a consequence of where a person lives, the ingenuity of local providers in obtaining funding, provincial priorities, etc.
- A "silo" or targetted approach for specific populations means duplication of administrative services and gaps in service provision. In Saskatoon for example, there are several organizations that provide adult education and each has its own wait list. There is no central clearinghouse to ensure that the same people are not on several waitlists or that people get into programs in the shortest time possible.
- Canada's population is approximately 30 million: population density 3.3 per square km.
- The National Literacy Secretariat receives approximately \$28 million annually or less than \$1 for each Canadian citizen. (The federal government also provides transfer payments to the provinces, some portion of which is used for adult upgrading).
- 25% of national project funds are used for promotion, no national funds directly for delivery other than EI for unemployed workers.
- There is no Folk High School system or nationwide study circle system or comparable post-secondary training for adult educators. Many adult educators are former school teachers without formal training in teaching adults.
- Adults who have Level 1 skills are more likely to respond to promotion campaigns than those with higher literacy skills (IALS, 1995, pp. 110-112); typically these individuals require a longer time and more support to achieve success.
- The National Literacy Secretariat provides a vital function in Canada by helping to inform provincial and regional organizations about what is going on in other parts of this large and sparsely populated country.

Policy Planning Process – Equity and Efficiency

In Sweden policy innovation has been described as radical “but with widespread consultation and great efforts to wear down and convert opposing interest” (Heidenheimer, 1983, p. 317). The unitary system of government and the relatively small size of the country (approximately the size of Saskatchewan) facilitate this but there is also a broad and accepted understanding of the potential of adult education for achieving equity and well-being in the country.

- Within less than a year since the Adult Education Initiative ended in 2002, a new policy has been developed and is now being implemented in municipalities throughout the country.. (NOTE: This recent policymaking process will be of special interest in the research to be conducted in April and May 2003).
- Research seems to have been built directly into the recently ended Adult Education Initiative so that in 2002, reports were readily forthcoming upon which a new national strategy could be based.
- All settled parts of the country are accessible by road or train; subsidized public transportation facilitates communication and travel between various parts of the country.

In Canada, the federal role in literacy policy has been limited to a small branch of Human Resources Development Canada, the National Literacy Secretariat, which has a limited mandate and budget. One might observe that the shift of the National Literacy Secretariat from Secretary of State to HRDC in 1993 signaled a movement toward Human Capital Development and away from social inclusion. Examples such as the National Children’s Agenda, the Early Childhood Development Accord show how federal guidelines can be part of a decentralized system in which the federal provides funding to the provinces.

- The federal system of government limits the role of the federal government in education and complicates the policy process. It is over a year since HRDC released two green papers on the Innovation Strategy and there have been two throne speeches and a National Innovation Summit that placed a pan-Canadian literacy strategy at the top of the agenda and policy has yet to be articulated.
- The role of the federal government in education is limited by the constitution so that currently many provinces are working independently on literacy strategies. For example, in May 2003 the Quebec government is sending a delegation to Europe to study adult education in several countries. Is there a plan for other Canadian jurisdictions to benefit from this? The National Literacy Secretariat is the one vehicle that could help disseminate this information to other provinces.
- While evaluation and accountability is a required component of project funding, dependence on project funding means that community based organizations spend an inordinate amount of time writing proposals and reports.¹
- Successful projects can not be refunded due to the requirement for "new" initiatives. This is an anomaly.
- Public policy seems to be guided more by consultation and public opinion rather than research.

Learning opportunities for adult Canadians are determined by where they live and the socio economic strata that they are born into.

Nonformal and informal learning

¹ In 1999-2000, the Saskatchewan Literacy Network, total budget of \$600,000, and a staff of 6 individuals working out of 4 offices located across the province was supported by 11 different projects. nv

"Literacy learning begins and continues when people understand its advantages and know it will benefit them....If the perceived advantages of literacy shift from job success and financial gain (which may be seen as closed to some minority groups) to personal and social uses, *in light of* rather than antagonistic to personal and cultural differences, associations with literacy as part of the majority ideology may begin to diminish" (Langer, 1987, p. 13).

In both Canada and Sweden, older workers, particularly male, are unlikely to participate in adult education programs. Adult education programs are becoming a fall back option for school leavers.

A recent study found that 95% of Canadians participate in informal learning (Livingstone, 2000) but, at the same time, those who "should" be interested in upgrading their skills are not participating in adult education programs (Long, 2002; Sussman, 2001).

In Sweden, informal and nonformal learning are supported by the national government in a variety of ways.

- National funding is provided to voluntary organizations for coordination and delivery of study circles at the local level. Estimates indicate that that 50% of the population participates in any given year; with participation greater in rural areas than in major urban centres.
- The government subsidizes newspapers and the complimentary copies found on public transportation are well read by the passengers (personal observation, 2002; (Milner, 2002).
- Trade unions in Sweden play a major role in ensuring training for employed (and unemployed) union members. In 1988, 86% of Swedish workers were unionized compared to 36% of Canadian workers (Rothstein, 1992, p. 85). This helped to ensure retraining for a large percentage of the Swedish work force through paid leave and labour market training courses.

In Canada, there is no comparable federal support for informal and nonformal learning.

- Symbolic of the government's support for literacy and learning is that the GST, since it was first introduced 1991, has been applied to reading materials. This tax on reading gives a mixed message about the government's support for literacy and learning. The 1996 exemption for schools, libraries and voluntary organizations helped school board and libraries but small community based organizations do not have the administrative capacity or option to claim a rebate (personal experience, nv). It is also a deterrent for low income Canadians.
- Library funding for both community and school libraries has been frozen for many years in most jurisdictions.
- The Community Access Program did provide infrastructure to small communities but as indicated by IALS, it typically would be those with higher skill levels who would benefit.

Recommendations for the Federal Government

Clearly there are major differences in the geography, history and demographics of the two countries. Nevertheless, the federal government could play a leadership role in promoting and encourage lifelong and lifewide learning in Canada in the following ways.

1. **That the federal government demonstrate that adult learning is a priority** by establishing a pan-Canadian agreement on literacy and essential skills that provides additional federal funds for sustainable programs under pan-Canadian guidelines and accountability rules.
2. **That the federal government promote equity and access in adult education policy development and delivery across the country** by enhancing the role of the National Literacy Secretariat. This could ensure that the NLSt can adequately disseminate information across the country and encourage professional development of literacy programs and their staff. This would help to ensure that the learning opportunities of Canadians are not determined by location or socioeconomic status.
3. **That the federal government promote informal learning by:**
 - removing the tax on reading materials, thus giving a clear demonstration of its commitment to lifelong learning;
 - supporting the development of community learning networks by building on the infrastructure provided by Community Access Program funding.

Further Information

Comparing Adult Education in Canada and Sweden Research Project

This research is funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council under the Valuing Literacy Strategic Initiative.

SPONSORING ORGANIZATION

University of Saskatchewan Website: www.usask.ca

PARTNER ORGANIZATION

Movement for Canadian Literacy Website: www.literacy.ca

START DATE: September 2002

END DATE: September 2004

We invite comments and questions related to the study and will be provide a complete report and further recommendations upon its completion and the regional consultations that follow it. For further information on this project as the research progresses, please visit the project website <http://www.usask.ca/education/alcs/>

Attachments

Research Team and Advisory Committee

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COMPARING ADULT EDUCATION IN CANADA AND SWEDEN

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