

## Why do Swedes Read Better than Canadians?

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### *Introduction*

This paper provides an overview of the findings of a recent study of adult education policy in Canada and Sweden. According to the International Adult Literacy Survey (1995), adult literacy levels in Sweden were significantly higher than those in Canada. Of particular interest was the finding that literacy levels in Sweden were less dependent on socio-economic status and educational attainment of parents than they were in Canada.

The qualitative research reported on here used a variety of methods to compare policy from the macro perspective of policy planners and the micro perspective of adults in upgrading programs. I compared policy goals at the macro level of policymakers, policy implementation, and policy as experienced at the micro level. Case studies located in two urban and two rural sites in each country allowed for comparisons both within and between Canada and Sweden. While there was little difference in the learning goals of adults in the two countries, the findings revealed a variety of factors that sustained and enhanced literacy skills beyond the formal school system.

### *Social Inclusion versus Economic Imperative*

The idea of raising the educational level of the population, *folkbildning*, has been connected to adult learning in Sweden for over one hundred years. It began with the establishment of the first folk high schools and study circles to provide education for the children of farm families who often could not attend school because they were needed to work on the farms. This goal was still evident in a variety of ways in 2003.

The first clue was that the term *literacy* did not appear in Swedish documentation. Adult education was an inclusive concept and the term *undereducated* referred to adults who had not completed compulsory or high school education. The common understanding seemed to be that “literacy is not an issue in Sweden. Everyone here can read” (J. Norberg, personal communication, Sept. 17, 2002). The basic entry or literacy level of classroom instruction was therefore an integral part of the formal adult education available to Swedes over the age of 19.

In Canada, literacy is typically understood as the lowest level of adult education and *learners* at this level are helped by *practitioners*, a term that includes instructors and volunteer tutors rather than teachers. There is a stigma attached to the term literacy despite efforts to position it as a spectrum of skills. The ability to read and write at a basic level such as Grade Five is often a prerequisite for acceptance into formal adult education programs. Insofar as governments discuss literacy it is an economic imperative within the framework of Human Capital Theory. If low literacy skills are considered a deficit, either in the economy or society, then literacy is considered an economic imperative with the onus for skill development perhaps falling to individuals or the business sector.

### *Social Entitlement versus Personal Responsibility*

In Sweden, adult education has been provided as a municipal program free of charge with universal access and priority given to least educated. Adult education is considered a compensatory or second chance for adults. Study grants, study leave, universal childcare and school lunches, all these social benefits facilitate adult learning. State funding also goes towards nonformal and informal learning for adults such as folk high schools, Study Circles, public television and the media (Kapsalis, 2001). Immigrants receive language training until they pass a national test of competence in Swedish (see Swedish Education: <http://www.skolverket.se/english/index.shtml>). The idea of social inclusion seems to underlie these policies.

In Canada, there has not been a comprehensive adult education policy at either a national or provincial level and literacy is a charitable cause (see <http://www.nald.ca>). Public funds are used to promote literacy (ABC CANADA 2003) but without increased learning opportunities to meet resulting demand. The onus remains on individuals to improve their skills but access to programs typically goes to those most likely to succeed. The recourse for individuals who do not meet entrance requirements is the volunteer tutor system. English as Second Language programs for immigrants is typically time limited and is often unavailable in rural centres. Adult education is considered an economic imperative by policymakers (Doray & Rubenson, 1997).

In the September 2003 national election, the party that campaigned for lower taxes was soundly defeated. Why does the Swedish electorate continue to support the level of taxation that funds universal childcare and education?

### *A Virtuous Circle versus a Vicious Circle*

Milner's (2002) concept of *civic literacy* provides some understanding of public support for universal social programs in Sweden as opposed to the Canadian focus on the individual benefit of cutting taxes. Milner argued that Sweden exemplifies high civic literacy and a virtuous circle in that the electorate discusses and understands public issues. The result is high voter turnout and support for taxation levels that serve to maintain the quality of social life in the country. In Canada, civic literacy is lower and voters are not as informed; voter turnout is lower with political discourse focusing more on the individual benefit of lower taxes. The result is a vicious circle in which those who benefit most from the system vote to maintain their own interest and the status quo.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. What can rural communities learn from the Swedish Study Circle model?
2. What would Canadian society look like if priority in access to adult education was given to those with the least education?
3. What implications would this have for schools in five years?
4. How far could public funds go if Canada had universal rather than targeted social programs?
5. What are the costs/benefits of changing from project funding to core funding for social programs such as adult education?

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### Database sources:

National Adult Literacy Database: <http://www.nald.ca>

Swedish Education: <http://www.skolverket.se/English/index.shtml>