

LEARNING COMMUNITIES: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

An OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) conference on learning cities held in Gothenburg, Sweden in 1992 launched the world-wide learning communities' initiative. By 2005 an Australian survey of learning cities and towns around the world identified over 300 such initiatives in every continent but Antarctica.

"Learning communities" has become a generic term which encompasses place-based learning initiatives in villages, towns, cities and regions. It is a concept the application of which varies according to the unique geographic, historic, socio-economic, and cultural conditions of each place. In some places it commences at the neighbourhood level while in others it is part of a national or provincial government initiatives. For instance, in the Republic of South Africa the Cape Province has become a "Learning Cape" while in Victoria State of Australia the state government launched a "learning towns" initiative, and in South Korea there is a growing learning cities national strategy. However "learning villages" in Finland, Portugal, and Italy commenced in their countries before national policies - such as the Finnish "Joy of Learning" lifelong learning strategy - emerged.

In many communities the dominant spiritual or ethical values of the people are expressed in their learning community model. In Udaipur, India principles of Mahatma Gandhi have informed local thought and action while in South Korea Confucian ethics have influenced development of almost 100 sites of the national government's learning cities strategy. In the Western world Judeo-Christian concerns for social justice and environmental sustainability, as well as development of a knowledge-based economy and society in which all can participate and contribute, spur many initiatives.

In 1996, the "European Year of Lifelong Learning", the concept of lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal was placed on the international agenda. That year the OECD report, "Lifelong Learning for All", emphasized the importance of recognizing both early learning and basic literacy as the foundations of a lifelong learning society in the era of an emerging knowledge-based economy. The same year UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization) released its report, "Learning: the Treasure Within" which identified four pillars or outcomes of learning, namely; Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Be, and Learning to Live Together. The UNESCO report emphasized the latter outcome as it claimed that unless humanity learned to live peacefully and fruitfully in harmony our quality of life - or survival of life itself - was at risk. Both reports emphasized the importance of the context in which our lives and learning occurs - our families, communities, schools and workplaces.

For over the past fifteen years a global learning cities movement has evolved. In Europe - and the UK in particular - old "smoke stack" economies of cities such as Sheffield and Birmingham were no longer sustainable. From Edinburgh to Southampton, such cities became the pioneers in a national learning cities strategy which saw literacy and numeracy as foundational skills essential for, economic re-generation, personal development, and social inclusion.

No British city emphasized literacy and numeracy skill development more than Birmingham. Annual participation of adult literacy learners was counted not in the hundreds but rather in the thousands as a

comprehensive, well-resourced strategy encompassing workplace, library, and family literacy was successfully implemented. Birmingham, like many other U.K. cities, is currently the location of the very successful “learning champions” initiative launched just two years ago. The scheme enables neighbourhood literacy bodies to hire local, successful literacy students to become community animators who use their existing peer networks to encourage their friends and neighbours to participate in local literacy and related pre-employment programs.

The British learning city initiative had an immediate influence in Australia where, just a decade ago, the State of Victoria introduced its “learning towns” strategy with ten urban and rural centres chosen as pilot projects. The most advanced of these pioneer initiatives is Hume - a large working class suburb of Melbourne. Hume was known as one of the most multi-cultural and economically depressed cities in Australia. However its city government initially created a “Social Justice Charter” and an associated “Citizen’s Bill of Rights” which became the foundation of the development of the Hume “Global Learning Village” involving over 300 local associations and a number of key industrial operations.

One of the most innovative literacy projects in Hume involved 28 mid-level managers of the local Ford Motors plant. The young Ford managers were challenged to mentor 28 Aboriginal adult literacy students for a year. By year end 24 of the students had completed their studies, and four went on to further education while 20 obtained entry-level jobs in the Ford plant.

Two international adult literacy surveys (1993 and 2003) revealed that 42% of Canada’s workforce had level 1 or 2 literacy and numeracy skills – according to Stats Canada levels inadequate for participation in the emerging knowledge-based economy and society. While some Canadians were pleased that in both surveys Canada had ranked just ahead of the U.S., many realized that we were far behind the two Nordic nations who led the survey each time (Sweden in 1993 was replaced by Norway in 2003 and both substantially led Canada).

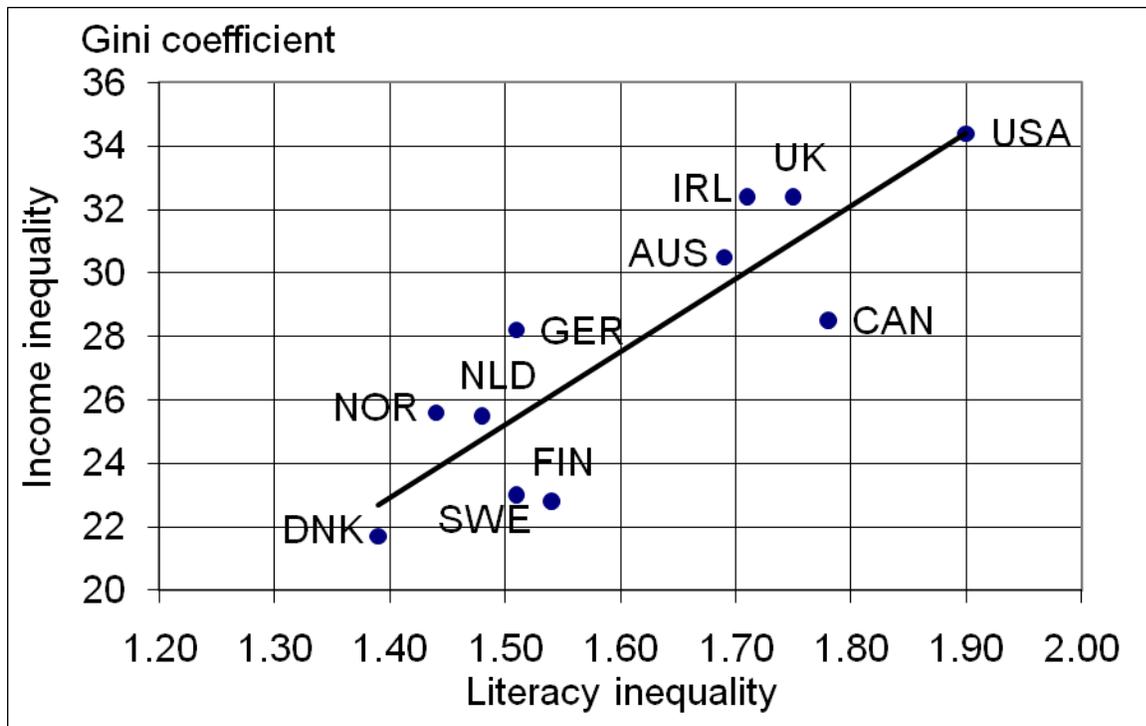
Substantial analysis of the international literacy surveys, and of the Nordic national lifelong learning policies, has resulted in a consensus regarding the reasons for the strong literacy performance of the Nordic nations. First, clear political will and commitment of Nordic governments is matched by their well-resourced literacy initiatives. Second, Nordic nations often have overall public policies as well as targeted strategic initiatives - the Swedish paid educational leave system as well as its parental leave scheme are two clear examples. Finally, in Nordic nations such as Sweden, the term “literacy” is not used but rather the concept is subsumed by the generic term “adult education” - which ranges from a remarkable adult study circle system (in a nation of nine million Swedes about 3 million participate in at least one study circle per year), active residential “folk high schools”, and a very effective system of libraries and information technology based “learning centres”.

The de-centralized Swedish paid educational leave system devolves decisions as to who goes on leave, and for what purposes, to the factory level but only after two national priorities - basic literacy and Swedish for New Swedes - are met. Long-term literacy objectives are among the rationale for the two-year parental leave scheme as research indicates that a loving, secure early learning environment enables increased brain development, and fewer life-span developmental problems: hence the initiative

provides both preventative and immediate benefits. Small wonder Stats Canada's analysis of Swedish literacy success emphasized its comprehensive lifelong learning system and subsequent "learning culture."

Finally, the development of a balance between a strong welfare net and economic performance (Sweden is among the top 10 nations in regard to economic productivity and innovation according to the World Economic Forum) has led to an equality of incomes as compared to Canada or the U.S. As can be seen by the following chart of gini coefficient analysis, there is a direct relationship between the inequality of incomes and the inequality of literacy found in Canada as contrasted to the Nordic model of equality.

Relationship between economic inequality (Gini coefficient) and the inequality in the distribution of adult literacy within selected countries. (Kjell Rubenson, OECD, 2000)



The international challenge regarding adult literacy is daunting. Recent Stats Canada reports indicate that there is a growing gap between the very rich and the very poor in our nation. We also appear to be creating a two-tiered society of the well-educated and the under-educated. Both of these stark, inter-related realities - and their impact - is seen most clearly in our local communities. Little wonder that the Canadian Council on Learning estimates that if there are no significant adult literacy initiatives in Canada we will see about 50% of those of work force age will be at levels one and two by 2031.

Other nations around the world are not waiting for Canada to strengthen its literacy policies and programs - they are moving rapidly to improve theirs. So-called developing nations such as India and China will soon be major political and economic actors on the international stage thanks to their

emphasis on literacy for all. The future of Canada will be greatly influenced by how we respond to the challenge of creating an effective adult education and literacy strategy in every province that builds upon active, learning communities and families. Perhaps we can devote the same passion, and commitment to developing a “learning culture” that we have invested in our “hockey culture”.