

## PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

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### CATCHING UP WITH THE SWEDES: PROBING THE CANADA-SWEDEN LITERACY GAP

SUMMARY BY T. SCOTT MURRAY

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#### What is this study about?

The Kapsalis paper is based on the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey. Or IALS, carried out between 1994 and 1998. While IALS surveyed 20 countries this paper deals with the results that were available on 12 of them; basically the data open to researchers at the time this document was written.

To understand the study's findings one must be familiar with the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). Briefly, IALS defined adult literacy as the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.

The survey looked at literacy skills in three domains. Document literacy or the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in documents like job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules and graphics. Prose literacy or the knowledge and skills required to understand and use information from texts like editorials, news stories, poems and fiction. And quantitative literacy or the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as balancing a chequebook or figuring out a tip, completing an order form or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement. Literacy scores on a 500-point scale were converted by IALS researchers into 5 levels of literacy, ranging from level 1 (lowest) to level 4/5 (highest).

The main focus of the study is on the incidence in the low literacy of adults age 16 to 65 who were born in the country in question. There is no official definition of low literacy. Often analysts equate low literacy with scoring below level three in document literacy. In this study the measure applied was that respondents failed to exceed level 2 in *all* three literacy domains (document, prose and quantitative).

The author was struck by the fact that among the 12 countries that participated in the IALS Sweden had the lowest incidence of low literacy skills, while Canada ranked around the middle with a low literacy rate double that of Sweden. Consequently he set out to find the factors accounting for the Canada-Sweden literacy gap and to identify the lessons to be learned from such a comparison.

The report has seven sections along with an Executive Summary and three appendices. The first section, part A entitled “Basic concepts”, explains the essential features of the IALS study. Part B provides an overview of the Canada-Sweden literacy gap. Part C looks at the effects of education and age on literacy performance while part E looks at a comparison of various literacy activities in Canadian and Swedish homes. Part F, the heart of the paper, explains the Canada-Sweden literacy gap and Part G is devoted to the author’s conclusions.

#### **What are the questions addressed by the study?**

This study’s objective is to explore the reasons why Sweden’s literacy performance is superior to that of Canada’s. The author asks, for example, if the literacy gap is similar between Canada and Sweden at similar levels of education? Does the literacy gap widen at higher ages? Can the gap be attributed to differences between the two countries in the extent of their relative commitment to life-long learning? Is the gap attributable to differences in literacy activities in everyday life?

The author speculates that the results of the study might serve as the first step toward identifying practical means for improving literacy skills in Canada. For instance, he asks the reader to suppose the study finds that volunteerism is more common in Sweden and that this difference explains part of the Canada- Sweden literacy gap. This finding would open the way for a second wave of investigation leading to questions such as: Why is volunteerism more common in Sweden and which Swedish policies could be adopted in Canada to promote volunteerism?

#### **Why is this study important?**

This paper opens a discussion and debate about the differences to be found between Canada and the country with the highest scores up to that time in international surveys of literacy skills. What it reveals is that there are patterns of variation in attitudes and practices, culture and policies that make a difference in skills performance. The lessons to be derived are interesting for educators, policy-makers and parents and while some of those lessons cannot be easily applied given the differences between Sweden and Canada culturally and politically, they are important nonetheless.

#### **What does the study conclude?**

The study’s major finding based on IALS data is that the incidence of low literacy is significantly higher in Canada than in Sweden in all three literacy domains. The author points out that in terms of document literacy, 40% of Canadians age 16 to 65, who were born in Canada, failed to exceed level 2, compared to 22% of Swedes born in Sweden. Using the study’s definition of low literacy (failed to exceed level 2 in all three domains) 29% of Canadians had low literacy skills, compared to 14% in Sweden. According to both measures, Canada’s incidence of low literacy skills was double that of Sweden’s.

The results of the Kapsalis analysis suggest that the Swedish education system may be more successful than the Canadian education system in equipping individuals with adequate literacy skills by the time they leave high school.

At the same time, at least half of the explanation for the current Canada-Sweden literacy gap could be that Canadians engage less often in activities that have been shown to be positively associated with literacy skills. Life-long learning is an area of relative weakness for Canada.

Canada has a strong education record. The authors says that Canada needs to recognize "...that there is a continuous need for maintaining and upgrading skills, much as an automobile needs regular maintenance or a computer requires upgrades." He adds that there is also a need for wider recognition in Canada that much can be achieved in the literacy front by promoting volunteer activities, primarily among youth, as well as encouraging the use of public libraries and getting people more interested in following current events.

Kapsalis observes that the results of the study point to a number of promising research questions that can help identify practical ways to narrow the literacy gap:

- Why can Swedes achieve a minimum level of literacy skills without necessarily going into post-secondary education? Does this mean that Swedish school curricula better perhaps with more emphasis on minimum skills? Are more resources devoted to early childhood education? Why is adult participation in education and training higher in Sweden?
- Are Swedish employers more committed to training than Canadian employers? Is the Swedish education system financially more accessible? Are government measures to encourage adult learning more effective?
- What factors explain the greater participation in volunteer activities among Swedes? Are there any unique features to the Swedish system that could explain the gap in volunteerism between Canada and Sweden, particularly with respect to youth where the literacy benefits of volunteerism are greater? What explains Sweden's higher volunteer participation rate?
- Why are public libraries used much more widely in Sweden than in Canada? Are Swedish libraries more attractive than Canadian libraries, and if so, how? Are libraries being used in the same way or for the same type of services in the two countries?

The author says that a key task is to identify ideas that appear to be working in Sweden and then to analyze how to adapt them to the Canadian reality. He adds that literacy activities such as lifelong learning or volunteer activities are worth pursuing for a variety of reasons. But, he concludes, the fact that they also contribute to higher literacy skills makes an even stronger the case for promoting such activities in Canada.

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#### **Publication information**

Catching up with the Swedes: Probing the Canada-Sweden Literacy Gap

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Published by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development

Canada, Ottawa: 2001

ISBN 0-662-29761-X

52 pages

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Version 1