

The Proof of the Pudding...
A Response to the Sticht-Murray Debate about IALS and ALL

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When two such eminent researchers as international consultant Thomas Sticht and statistician Scott Murray see the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and the more recent Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) Survey, so differently what is a literacy advocate to believe? I am writing to make sense of this divergence and I argue that both Sticht and Murray provide us with some of the ingredients but the proof is in the end product.

According to the ALL survey, 42% of adult Canadians have inadequate literacy skills for today's society. These figures are essentially unchanged from the 1994 IALS findings. With the release of the 2005 results, literacy groups in Canada scrambled to explain the lack of progress since 1994. They fed the results into public awareness campaigns and used them to lobby politicians at both provincial and national levels in an effort to increase support for literacy programs. They renewed the call for a national literacy strategy to address the literacy 'problem'.

Sticht and Murray disagree on the significance of the survey findings. Sticht argues that the Response Probability (RP) of 80% used in analyzing the results is too stringent and that a Response Probability of 50% would be both more accurate and realistic; this would halve the number of Canadians placed in Levels One and Two. He also questions the choice of Level Three as the "minimum" required in today's world. Murray responds that an RP of 80% reflects the level of proficiency that employers demand and argues that Level Three is the literacy level that allows individuals to cope well with change.

It comes as little surprise that a Scandinavian country again tops an international adult literacy survey. The ALL survey reported that literacy levels in Norway were significantly higher

than they were in Canada. Sweden did not participate in the ALL survey but Swedish literacy levels reported in the IALS were higher than those in Canada. My doctoral research, comparing adult learning in Canada and Sweden (Veeman, 2004), helps us understand these differences.

What's wrong with the recipe in Canada?

Only a small fraction of those at Levels One and Two seek to enter literacy programs (Long, 2002). A demographic analysis of Level One adults in Ontario showed that most were over age 55 or new Canadians speaking a second language, neither of which were eligible for literacy funding support (Sussman, 2001). Apart from Sussman's study, we have little idea of who comprises the 40% of Canadians functioning below Level Three. Based on the self-rating of literacy skills (IALS, 1995), the adults most likely to respond to public awareness ads are those at the lower literacy levels. They may not have completed high school in Canada whether because of learning difficulties, family problems, immigrant, or Aboriginal status. Yet typically the recourse for such individuals is to rely on volunteer tutors to gain the skills required for entry into formal education programs.

Canadians with higher literacy skills have a better chance of getting into accredited programs with funding support; they should be able to finish a program in a shorter time frame. Adults with the lowest literacy levels, typically those with the greatest barriers to learning, must rely on volunteer tutors. Childcare and transportation are often barriers to participation in formal adult upgrading programs. Literacy programs and community groups depend, such as they can, on project funding. Since the early 1990s, accountability requirements have become increasingly strict, thereby compromising service delivery (Scott, 2003). Public rhetoric to the contrary, literacy is seen primarily as an individual problem.

The Swedish Recipe

Not only were overall Swedish literacy levels higher than those in Canada but they were less dependent on educational attainment and socioeconomic status. Sweden has provided adult basic education to adults throughout that country since 1967 with priority given to those with the least education. Education is free from kindergarten to post-secondary levels. In addition to more universal access to basic education, the Swedish government also supports informal learning opportunities such as study circles, the folk universities, and the media. These activities help to sustain literacy skills.

When adults are entitled to education at any level, there is no stigma to participation in adult upgrading. Universal childcare and a school lunch program facilitate access to education, of particular importance for parents who decide to improve their education for the sake of their children. Trade unions and businesses have also been important players in providing adult education programs and, with a level of unionization nearly three times that in Canada, workers can feel more secure about taking part in a course than they might in Canada. But even highly paid industrial workers in Sweden were reluctant to take up available study grants when there was no guarantee of job advancement. Adults seek out learning opportunities when the benefits are clear, there is no stigma attached, and material and social costs are covered.

The Taste Test

For me, the key finding of both studies is not the percentage of Canadians or Americans who fall below a given level. Rather why do the social democracies of northern Europe turn out a better pudding than the liberal democracies of the anglophone world? Technical questions aside, the IALS and ALL findings reflect the socioeconomic disparities in liberal democracies. The taste test of the literacy pudding is that after 10 years, there has been no substantive change in

literacy levels in Canada. Major public awareness campaigns and significant lobbying efforts based on the IALS findings have not resulted in more learning opportunities for adults in Canada nor an upsurge in the number of Canadians seeking to upgrade their skills. The international adult literacy surveys are impressive in their scope and, no doubt, in their cost! - but the results have not convinced public opinion of the need for policy changes. Regardless of what percentage of adults are at a given level, the results in northern Europe show that an adult education system that is not based on a charity model of volunteer tutoring results in more pleasing pudding.

The social democratic approach considers adult education as a public investment that raises the educational level of the whole society. This contrasts with the economic and social policies of liberal democracies (Caulkin, 2005) where the emphasis has been on meritocracy and individual achievement rather than social equity. The “rampant individualism” that has damaged trust, fairness, and social bonds (Layard, 2005) has not served to raise literacy levels.

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