

What can we learn from Sweden?

An interview with **Nayda Veeman**

For the past two years, Nayda Veeman has been researching literacy work in Sweden. To learn what she has discovered, we interviewed her by e-mail.

Literacies:

What are your preliminary observations about the major differences between Canada and Sweden in terms of how the need for programs is established?

Veeman:

From 1967 until 1997, all 288 municipalities in Sweden were mandated to offer adult education as a compensatory program for adults who had not completed upper secondary school—the equivalent of Canadian grade twelve. Adult basic education (literacy) is not differentiated from adult education generally. Programs are required to give priority to adults with the least education.

In 1997, the Swedish government established the Adult Education Initiative. The AEI was a response to rising unemployment during the economic recession of the early nineties. The government wanted to do something and adult education was one thing it could do so it allocated additional funding (\$56 CDN for each Swede for each of five years) to increase the supply and diversity of adult learning options. The AEI gave study grants and loans even for adults studying at the very basic level.

Initially funding was allocated to municipalities according to the level of unemployment in the region. In subsequent years, it depended on the number of adults who had completed adult basic education (up to and including high school) in the previous year. I think the important thing to realize is that this funding was on top of the regular adult education funding given to municipalities.

The AEI also encouraged introduction of different learning opportunities at the municipal level, including private provision. What had been funded until then were the municipal adult education courses that were the same as in the school program but for adults.

Literacies:

It is interesting to hear that when Sweden identified adult basic education as a priority in 1997, they



focused on increasing the number and diversity of learning opportunities. In Canada, on the other hand, a large proportion of funding goes towards increasing demand (in the form of public awareness campaigns) while no additional funding is allocated for programs. What do you make of this contrast?

In Sweden, instructors in adult education programs are unionized municipal workers.

Veeman:

I think we put the onus on individuals to improve their skills whereas in Sweden, this is seen as a concern for the whole society and a shared responsibility between individuals and the state.

My question would be how far could we go in offering universal programs and the support that enables adults to participate if we reallocated the energy and money used for tutor recruitment and training, public awareness and consultations?

Literacies:

How is program effectiveness evaluated in Sweden?

Veeman:

Program administrators are required to submit annual statistical reports on number of students, completion etc. Funding for subsequent years depends on how many people finished.

How far could we go if we offered universal programs and the supports that enable adults to participate?

Literacies:

How is the value of adult basic education measured in Sweden?

Veeman:

This can only be answered implicitly, but given the level of government funding for non-formal and informal education such as study circles, etc., as well as the formal municipal adult education system throughout the country, it seems to be highly valued as part of folkbildning, raising the educational level of the population.

Literacies:

Your research has looked at policy in intent, in practice and in experience. What have you observed about how the intent of policy affects how learners experience programs?

Veeman:

If there is no stigma attached to attending adult education and adults have the resources to do so, it is easier for them to participate. I really found little difference between Canada and Sweden in the reasons why adults chose to go back to school or the reasons why they had not succeeded in school as youth. There was a big difference in the childcare available and there was no volunteer tutoring in Sweden. The dropout rates and the experience in the classroom did not vary between the two countries.

There was a big difference for English-as-a-second-language learners in that, although they had less likelihood of ever having seen or heard Swedish before coming to the country, they could have Swedish-for-immigrants language training until they could pass a national exam (three levels) so the exit was competency-based rather than time-limited as it is in Canada.

Literacies:

What have you noticed about how policy affects practitioners' experience of work in adult basic education?

Veeman:

In Sweden, instructors in adult education programs are unionized municipal workers. The program administrators faced a lot of stress during the adult education initiative because they had to develop new initiatives annually over the five years. Most adult education teachers had come from the K-12 system and so were professionally trained. In rural areas, the issue of finding qualified staff and meeting the needs of students sometimes had to be met by borrowing teachers from the school system, or incorporating adults into classes for youth.

Literacies:

What did you learn about how policy affects the design of programs?

Veeman:

The municipal adult education program from 1967-1997 was like a regular school program but for adults. This program still exists in most of the municipalities. The Adult Education Initiative resulted in more diversity so that some more concentrated programs were offered, specialized courses in personal care or horticulture for example. As well, the residential folk high schools that provided much greater counselling and support could get funding to provide education for adults.

The AEI led to greater decentralization, so program design could be more reflective of local conditions and economic needs. Programs also depended on the qualifications and interest of local coordinators.

We'd like to encourage people to think about what can happen in Canada.

Literacies:

Now that the Swedish part of the study is finished, what are the next steps for this project?

Veeman:

We are extending the research to Canada. Right now we are looking at the realities, the policies and experiences—how policy is being played out in the various provinces. We are presenting our findings in an effort to try to engage the literacy community. We would like to encourage people to think about what can happen in Canada, what from Sweden is relevant here. ■

For more information about this research, go to www.usask.ca/education/alcs