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#### Recommended Citation

Rubenson, Kjell (2007). "Adult Learning in Canada in an International Perspective," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/papers/89>

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# Adult Learning in Canada in an International Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper examines adult learning in Canada in an international perspective. The paper explores the level of inclusiveness and observes the relative importance of the state, employer and individual in the structuring of learning opportunities.

With learning becoming “profitable” participation in lifelong learning and adult education has finally emerged as a central public policy issue. Supranational organisations like the EU and the OECD have initiated extensive policy research on adult and lifelong learning (EU, 2005; OECD, 2005) and national governments give increased attention to how to increase participation in adult education and training. Paradoxically the heightened interest by policy makers in better understanding how to encourage participation in adult education and training has not been met by much interest in the scholarly community. While it has become something of a growth industry among researchers to critique the political project of lifelong learning there is little accompanying attention given to the development of new and integrated theoretical perspectives on participation. However, concerned adult educators have to go further than to just provide critical discourse analyses. What is called for is the construction of understandings of participation that can inform a counter hegemonic struggle aimed at effecting ‘real possibilities’ of a strategy of lifelong learning for all.

It is in this context, that this paper is situated. This paper is based on three recent empirical studies (Desjardins, Rubenson and Malik, 2006; Rubenson, in press and Rubenson, Desjardins and Yoon, in press) and examines adult learning in Canada in an international perspective. The paper explores the level of inclusiveness and observes the relative importance of the state, employer and individual in the structuring of organised learning opportunities.

## Theoretical Perspective

Theoretical perspectives on participation come primarily from the economics of education and adult education. The predominant approach within the former has been so-called human capital theory. The underlying assumption is that individuals maximize welfare as they conceive it. Human capital analysis starts from the assumption that individuals decide on their education by weighing the benefits and costs of this investment (Becker, 1964). A similar argument is in research on barriers. Jonsson and Gähler (1996) conclude that: “Instead of barriers, that might have to do with cost or lack of time, it is probably differences in expected rewards that can explain why some choose to participate while others remain outside” (p.38). The human capital perspective is used not only to explain individuals’ investment in their education but also employers’ efforts to train workers in terms of the rationality of investing in upgrading employees’ skills with expected returns in increased productivity, quality, and competitiveness for the firm. Human capital theory has received serious criticism from various quarters, not only for the difficulties involved in the operationalization of the concept to provide a basis for empirical studies, but also for its individualistic approach to the decision-making in investment in human capital, and the implied notion of social equity and fairness in sharing benefits among social groups (Brown, Green and Lauder, 2001). According to the human capital

approach, all social phenomena should be traced back to their foundation in individual behaviour and thus human capital formation is typically conceived as being carried out by individuals acting in their own interests. However, as critics point out, this does not address inequalities in power, wealth, and influence (Torres, 1996). Specifically, critics have pointed out differences in families' resources (HEDC/OECD, 2000), demands of the workplace (OECD, 2005b), employers' decisions (Vignoles, Galindo-Rueda and, Feinstein, 2004), government interventions (Rubenson, 2006), and many other social structural factors that will exogenously determine the process of decisions on the investment in human capital. Hence, structuralist-oriented theories emphasize the role of social and economic institutions (government policy, organizations, industries, markets, and classes) at the macro level, and work structures at the micro level, in the reproduction of the prevailing class structure of society, of which the educational and training system is viewed as an integral element (Brown, Green and Lauder, 2001; Illeris, 2004).

In adult education circles the so-called Chain response-model by Cross (1981) has come to dominate research on participation. The model takes the individual as the starting point and identifies two main constructs: self-evaluation and attitude toward education. These internal factors are seen to influence the value of goals (valence) and the expectation that participation will meet goals. Valence and expectations are also affected by life transition and development tasks that confront the individual in various life cycle phases. Opportunities and barriers and available information will then modify whether or not an individual will come to participate. Chain response-model employs psychological concepts to explain why some adults participate while others do not. Cross (ibid) argues that this does not mean that societal aspects are ignored; on the contrary, all theories are interactionist in that they understand participation in terms of the interaction between an individual and his or her environment. However, they tend to neglect the individual's life history which governs their subjective perspectives on learning and can explain why they might see non-participation as a positive and rational rather than a negative and irrational decision (see Field, 2007). Further, they do not directly address how the main constructs in the model are related to, and interact with, the broader structural and cultural context. Thus, knowledge about how the individual interprets the world cannot by itself give an understanding of participation. Only when we also include structural factors, as discussed above, and analyze the interaction between them and the individual conceptual apparatus does an interpretation become possible. Participation in adult education as well as training culture - in its broadest interpretation - can be understood in terms of: societal processes and structure, institutional processes and structure, and individual consciousness and activity.

### **Evidence on Participation Patterns in Adult Education**

It is not possible in this paper to provide an extensive summary of the findings from the three studies. Instead the ambition is to draw attention to some possible relations between participation patterns, individual and structural factors, subsystems of adult learning and policy regimes that can help inform the understanding of adult learning in Canada.

The findings build on a) comparative evidence on participation patterns, barriers and levels of inequalities in adult learning (The International Adult Literacy Survey, IALS and its follower Adult Life Skills and Literacy Survey, ALLS), b) Canadian participation data (Adult Education and Training Survey, AETS) and c) information on national policy strategies (OECD's *Thematic Review on Adult Learning*). The findings will be summarised under four headings.

### *National Variations in Participation Rates*

The findings vary somewhat between different surveys (see e.g. OECD, 2005a), but although data sources vary and strict comparability is not possible, the country groupings that follow are fairly consistent across surveys (Desjardins, Rubenson, Malik, 2006). Based on a review of key surveys the authors group the surveyed countries as follows (ibid):

- A small group of countries have overall participation rates that are consistently close to or exceeding 50 percent. The Nordic countries including Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden comprise this group.
- Countries of Anglo-Saxon origin including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States have overall participation rates that fall into the 35 to 50 percent range- with Canada at the lower end of this range. A few of the smaller Northern European countries including Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland are also among this group.
- The next group has overall participation rates between 20 and 35 percent. It features the remainder of Northern European countries including Austria, Belgium (Flanders), and Germany. Also among this group are some Eastern European countries, namely Czech Republic, and Slovenia, and some Southern European countries including France, Italy and Spain.
- Finally, there is a group of countries with overall participation rates in adult learning consistently below 20 percent. These include the remaining Southern European countries, namely Greece and Portugal, as well as some additional Eastern European countries, Hungary and Poland. Chile, the only South American country where comparable data are available, is also in this group.

A first conclusion, based on the above country groupings, is that the spread in participation rates is larger than might be expected. It is not surprising that there are major differences between countries which are at different stages in the modernisation process. However, the large variation between highly-developed Northern European, Canada and other Anglo-Saxon countries suggests major differences in the role of the state, the formation of learning opportunities at work and the structure of adult education.

### *Participation, Educational Structure and Welfare State Regime*

Regardless of country, the data show that as people age they are less likely to participate in adult education and training. However, it is important to note that within the general pattern there are interesting national differences. In the Nordic countries, participation remains high up until people are in their mid 50s. Older adults, 56-65 years of age, have, in comparison to comparable groups in most other countries, relatively high participation, around 35 percent as compared to 15 percent in Canada. Through the existence of a publicly-supported popular adult education, individuals in the Nordic countries have access to a form of adult education that can respond to different aspirations and needs than the formal educational system or the education and training supplied by the employer.

It is not surprising that the comparative data show that the *Matthew Effect* operates in all societies (i.e., the ones who already have education get more and those who do not get less). However, in the context of public policy, it is particularly interesting that the relationship is stronger in some countries than in others, which suggests that public policy can be somewhat effective in moderating inequality in adult education participation. The inequalities are lowest in the so called social democratic Welfare states (Esping- Andersen, 1991) and high in the Anglo-Saxon countries, particularly the USA and more moderately in Canada (OECD, 1997;

Desjardins, Rubenson, Malik, 2006). The national variations in rates and distribution strongly support Martin Carnoy's point that there are crucial differences in what adult education attempts to do and can do in different social-political structures (Carnoy, 1995, p.3). Thus, the participation pattern in a country reflects its particular welfare state regime as expressed in manifest policy ambitions and the use of financial policy levers (Rubenson, 2006). It is of interest to note that a review of the national reports produced for the OECD's *Thematic Review of Adult Learning* (OECD, 2003; 2005) points to crucial differences in interpretation of the equity goal. Thus, in countries with a high participation and comparatively lower disparities the issue of combating inequalities is addressed in a comprehensive way and linked to broader democratic ambitions. The overriding policy goals on adult learning in these countries could, in Esping-Andersen's words, be seen to reflect a shift in "the accent of social citizenship from a preoccupation with income maintenance towards a menu of rights to lifelong learning and qualification" (1996, p.259). In many ways the broader goals of adult learning are expressed in a very similar fashion to the goals of general education. This is not to say that concerns about knowledge and skills are in any way in the background in these countries but that issues around skills do not mainly employ an economic discourse but rather are situated in a broader social agenda. This is what seems to differentiate the countries with the highest participation rates and lower inequalities from those with somewhat lower but comparatively still high participation rates, like Canada and other Anglo-Saxon countries. In the latter, adult learning policies are closely linked to a well-developed skills agenda. These countries raise concern about inequalities and the need to recruit vulnerable groups, but what seems to distinguish these countries is their more restricted perspective on inequalities.

The state's interpretation of the equity goal affects funding regimes. The high and relatively more equal participation rates in the Nordic countries can partly be explained by the structure of their public support for disadvantaged groups through ear-marked student assistance and support for outreach activities. Further, the analysis of differences in funding regimes among the countries in the OECD Thematic Review indicates that countries with high participation and lower inequalities are less inclined to allocate funds based on some form of performance criteria like educational gains and/or labour market success of program participants. As is often pointed out in the literature this strategy may have the unintended outcome of institutions focusing not on the most vulnerable but on those with the best prospects to succeed (see e.g. Heckman and Smith, 2003).

### *The Long Arm of the Job*

The long arm of the job refers to the way the labour market structure, and more generally the nature of occupations and production, increasingly bear strong influence on the distribution of adult learning. The affect of the long arm of the job on organised learning opportunities as well as on informal learning in Canada and other industrialised countries is very evident in the comparative data. First, almost 4 out of every 5 Canadian learners participating in organised forms of adult learning report to have participated for job and career reasons. Second, there is a strong link between employment and participation. Third, participation varies across industry and type of job. Factors like occupation, industry, and whether the person holds a supervisory role can be seen as proxies for skill demands in the job. Thus, it is of interest to note that more direct measures, like the frequency and variety of reading practices is one of the most significant determinants of participation in work-related adult education and training (Rubenson, Desjardins and Yoon, in press). Match and mismatch between job tasks and observed skills strongly impact

on the possibilities and readiness to engage in adult education and training. The critical finding is that people with low skills and working in jobs with high engagement in literacy report a notably higher participation rate than those with high skills and working in jobs with low engagement in literacy. The findings can be explained by the employers' readiness to provide direct financial support for adult education and training of the low skilled in high-literacy engagement jobs. There are significant country differences in the link between demand and participation. Thus a comparison between Canada, Norway, Switzerland and the USA reveals that the link between demand and participation is particularly striking in Norway. In Norway, 44 percent of participants who are low skilled and in high engagement jobs (i.e., those with a skills shortage) received employer support for adult education and training as compared to 29 percent of those who are high skilled and in jobs with low literacy engagement (i.e., those with a skills surplus). The comparable result for those with high skills and in high engagement jobs is 47 percent. Canada has a partly similar pattern but the percent of participants receiving employer support is somewhat lower and the role of formal education seem to play a more important role -- 28 percent for those with a skills shortage, 22 percent for those with a skills surplus and 37 percent for those with high skills and in high engagement jobs). In fact, participation among the former is almost as high as among those who are high skilled and in high engagement jobs. It is worth noting that according to the ALLS data, skills matches and mismatches not only impact on Canadians' participation in organized forms of adult learning but also on engagement in informal learning. With the exception of very general and non specific activities like learning by watching or by doing, those who are low skilled and in low engagement jobs are the least active in informal learning. In contrast, those who are high skilled and in high engagement jobs report the highest participation rate. Finally, those with a skills shortage are more often engaged in informal learning than people classified as having a skills surplus. This pattern is also evident in the three other countries.

The impact of the welfare state regime is also affecting the long arm of the job. This can be illustrated by the relationship between labour market status and participation in adult education and training. So, for example, employed adults are more likely to participate in adult education and training than unemployed adults but this relationship varies substantially across countries. According to the ALLS data, the total participation rate among employed Canadians and Norwegians is identical, 57 percent. However, while 49 percent of unemployed Norwegians and 40 percent of those outside the labour market are enrolled, the rates for Canada are substantially lower, 31 and 24 percent. These disparities reflect variation in labour market policies and the responsibility the state assumes for vulnerable groups.

### **Conclusion**

The findings raise issues about the competitiveness and inclusiveness of the Canadian adult learning system, the challenges in increasing participation, especially among vulnerable groups, and the need to revisit and strengthen public policy on adult learning. In comparison to countries with high participation rates and relatively lower inequality the Canadian state expresses a rather restrictive ambition, particularly when it comes to supporting vulnerable groups. The data point to the necessity to anchor a Canadian strategy on lifelong learning in the world of work. It has to build on the findings that the availability of training opportunities at work is strongly related to the demand structure: the more skills being used, the more likely the employee is to train. A shift from an economic and human resource strategy based on a low skill/low-wage equilibrium to one that organises work according to a high-skills equilibrium will

most likely change low-skilled workers' perceptions of the value of participating in adult education and training.

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