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## Adults' Readiness to Learn: Questioning Lifelong Learning for All

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# Adults' Readiness to Learn: Questioning Lifelong Learning for All

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**Abstract.** Lifelong learning for all has become a major policy objective in the industrialized world. This study, which is based on analysis of IALS data, indicates several disturbing trends in the present distribution of lifelong learning. The differences in readiness to learn as an adult can be explained by "the long arm of the family and the long arm of the job." A main conclusion is that Lifelong learning for all is conditional on a working life organized in a way that promotes the use of literacy, and a society where people are encouraged to think, act, and be engaged.

## Background and purpose

Policy documents from various nations, as well as reports from intergovernmental organisations e.g. the European Union, OECD, and UNESCO, uniformly promote lifelong learning as the foundation for adult educational and training policy. In 1994, UNESCO chose *Lifelong Learning for All* for its midterm strategy covering the period 1996-2001. In the same year the OECD conference of ministers of education proposed that member countries adopt "making lifelong learning a reality for all" as a priority for the ensuing five year period. This brings the question of adults' readiness to actively engage in learning to the forefront of the research and policy agenda. Despite the emphasis on lifelong learning for all even a superficial reading of the international literature indicates several contradictions in the discourse surrounding lifelong learning and a lack of serious interest in who benefits (Rubenson, 1997). Thus, instead of just promoting lifelong learning as a solution to economic and social problems facing society the purpose of this study is to critically examine what influences adults' readiness to engage in learning, and to develop an understanding of why large groups are excluded from the emerging learning society. Of special interest was the relationship between everyday learning (nature and structure of everyday experiences) and participation in organised forms of adult education and training. For example, does everyday learning increase or decrease the knowledge gaps between ethnic and social groups? The discussion starts with a brief look at the changing discourse on lifelong learning.

## The Changing Discourse on Lifelong Learning

A reading of the literature on lifelong learning indicates a first and second generation of lifelong learning. The two generations seem to be informed by competing ideologies, are rooted in different policy imperatives on education and contain markedly different notions of what a realization of the principle of lifelong learning should look like.

With a few exceptions most of the literature on the first generation of lifelong learning was done under the auspices of UNESCO and aimed at clarifying the concepts. Within UNESCO, conceptual work stressed that the evolution of lifelong learning involved the horizontal integration of education and life. That is, not only could educative experiences be found in everyday life but also in continuous "educational situations." A precondition for lifelong learning was said to be a changed conceptualization of education, encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal settings for learning. An important issue in the analysis was how a "system of lifelong learning" could reduce rather than increase educational gaps in society. Through self-evaluation, self-awareness and self-directed learning,

humans were expected to work towards achieving the central goals of democracy, humanism and the total development of self. One warned against narrowly conceptualizing lifelong learning as being merely an extension of the idea of retraining without taking into account the humanizing qualities of individual and collective life. It was stressed time after time that a crucial weakness in the structure of society is the absence of political will, not only towards the democratization of education but also towards the democratization of society. In order for lifelong learning to become a reality it was pointed out that people should live in a context that encourages them to want to learn.

The writing on lifelong education and lifelong learning at this time was a strange mixture of global abstractions, utopian aspirations, and narrow practical questions that often lost sight of the overall idea. The first generation's idea with its roots in humanistic traditions and utopian vision quickly disappeared from the public discourse.

Driven by a different ideology with different goals and dreams the idea reappeared in the latter part of the 1980s. Judging from national policy documents as well as those coming from intergovernmental organizations like EU, OECD and UNESCO it is evident that lifelong learning has become the New Jerusalem by promising to solve some of the economic and social problems facing the industrialized world. The discourse on the second generation of lifelong learning is, at its core, almost exclusively structured around an "economistic" world view. In view of the broader political developments it is hardly surprising that policy documents on lifelong learning from various countries written since the 1980s reflect an erosion of commitment to equality. Instead the concerns are with accountability, standards, relevance to the needs of the economy and cost effectiveness.

Interestingly the second generation of lifelong learning has seen a stronger commitment to the life-wide aspect of the idea. For example OECD has replaced its former concept of recurrent education with the broader idea of lifelong learning. This coincides with a noticeable change in OECD's interpretation: from a narrow focus on higher and secondary education, to the broader perspective of lifelong learning. "Ministers agreed to focus on how to make learning a process extending from early age through retirement, and occurring in schools, the workplace and many other settings." (Op. Cite. P.3.). The life-wide aspect is not confined to non-formal education. At the very core of lifelong learning is the informal or "everyday" learning, positive or negative, which occurs in day-to-day life (Dohmen, 1996, p.46). Here, the issue is the nature and structure of everyday experiences, and their consequences for a person's learning processes, ways of thinking, and competencies. What challenges do people face? What possibilities do these challenges create, not only for restrictive forms of learning, but also for investigative learning promoting new ways of acting (see Engeström, 1994)? From a lifelong angle, it becomes important to observe how, during the course of a life cycle, motivation is closely related to the structure and processes of day-to-day situations, and to what extent it promotes motivation to engage in organized learning activities and/or investigative learning (Rubenson, 1997b). It is this position that informs the theoretical perspective put forward in this paper.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is conducted in the tradition of social and cultural reproduction. As Moorow and Torres (1995) point out it is high time to return to this theme in educational research.

The preoccupation with motivation in research on participation resulted in an emphasis on the individual and psychological theory. The societal aspects are not ignored. On the contrary, commonly theories assume that participation is understood in terms of interaction between an individual and his or her environment. However, the focus and conceptual apparatus is clearly psychological oriented. Structural factors and/ or public policy decisions are not directly addressed but are at best treated as a vague background when explaining whether or not an individual will participate. An understanding of how these factors in of themselves can constitute barriers is commonly ignored. Further, the societal processes that govern these structures are not part of theories on participation. Knowledge about how the individual interprets the world cannot by itself give an understanding of readiness to learn. Only when we also include structural factors and analyze the interaction between them and the individual conceptual apparatus does an interpretation become possible. Adults' readiness to learn and barriers preventing it - in its broadest interpretation - can be understood in terms of societal processes and structure,

institutional processes and structure and individual consciousness and activity. Applying this to the expectancy-value paradigm on participation one has to take into account the crucial "circumstances" in which expectancy and value get socially constructed. In accordance with (Giddens, 1984:xxi). there is a dualism between structure and agent and it is important to focus also on processes through which a human being as an active agent governs his/her relationship with adult education.

The link between societal processes and structure and institutional processes as they relate to adult education and training depend to a large extent on the possibilities and limits of the state. As Carnoy (1995:p3) argues that there are crucial differences in what adult education attempts to do and can do in different socio-political structures. Thus, the funding regimes and provision of adult education as well as eventual regulations around private sector adult education and training will depend on the political strength of the various collectives. Public policy on funding regimes and provision of adult education can be understood in terms of various forms of welfare state (see Esping-Andersen, 1989). The liberal welfare state with its means-tested assistance and modest universal transfers caters mainly to a clientele of low-income dependents and would see adult education mainly as a way of getting people off welfare. Participation would mainly be left to market forces and entitlements are strict and often associated with stigma. The social democratic welfare state, according to Esping-Andersen, rather than tolerating a dualism between state and market, between working class and middle class promotes an equality of the highest standard not an equality of minimal needs. The state will take a more active role and be more concerned about inequalities in participation.

In terms of institutional barriers we have to look at "the politics of adult education and training opportunities" including financial support. From this perspective, the fact that adult education and training is only slowly being recognized as an important and integrate component of a strategy for lifelong learning for all, can be seen as a major barrier. For close to ten years OECD reports, as well as other policy literature, have stressed the vital importance of adult education and training. One therefore has to wonder at the limited attention it receives in national educational policies (Rubenson, 1997). Also there is a reluctance to address the old question of divided responsibilities between public and private sectors for educating and training adults. The issue for the state is the extent to which it should interfere in the "training market." So far governments, regardless of political color, have been cautious about interfering in the training market.

From the perspective of individual consciousness and activity, adults' readiness to learn can partly be understood in terms of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. The latter is a system of dispositions that allows and governs how a person acts, thinks and orients him/herself in the social world. This system of dispositions is a result of social experiences, collective memories, ways of thinking that have been engraved in the mind. Bourdieu's theory rests on the idea that habitus, formed by the life they have lived, govern individuals conceptions and practice and in this way contribute to the reproduction of the social world and sometimes - in the occurrence of lacking agreement between habitus and the social world - to change. A given habitus facilitates a certain distinct set of strategies that in relation to the social situation provides the individual with certain room to act. In this respect the behavior is seen as a result of human agency. Through socialization within the family, in the school and, later on, in working life, a positive disposition toward adult education becomes a part of some groups' habitus but not of others classes. This is in accordance with findings from longitudinal studies which have revealed a strong link between cultural oriented processes in the home - educational experiences - and cultural behavior in adulthood (see e.g. Härnqvist, 1989). The extent to which "objective" institutional and situational factors come to act as barriers will consequently depend on what habitus a person has come to develop and how this results in a certain interpretation of the value and expectancy of the outcome of actively engaging in some form of learning activity.

## Research Design

The study involves secondary analysis of data collected as part of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which is a collaborative effort by 12 countries with the support of OECD, UNESCO and the European Union. The IALS dataset consists of a large sample of adults (ranging from 1500 to 8000 per country) in Belgium, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the US. The persons involved in the study were given the same wide-ranging test of their literacy skills and a questionnaire collecting

information about family background and literacy practices in the home, work situation, leisure activities and involvement in everyday learning activities as well as organised forms of adult education and training. Using multivariate analysis (logistic regression) these data have been used to critically examine who is involved in different forms of lifelong learning, the barriers to lifelong learning and the structural inequality in learning opportunities.

### Findings, Conclusions and Implications

The IALS data clearly show that readiness to learn as an adult can be explained by "the long arm of the family." There exists a strong link between an individual's level of functional literacy and the literate culture of the family in which the person grew up. While roots are established during childhood, readiness for learning is further fostered by the educational system. The same social and cultural forces that are behind the relationship between early literacy and family background also link the distribution of educational attainment as well as reading and writing habits as an adult across different socio-economic groups (OECD, 1997). Not surprisingly, participation in adult education and training increases with the level of education: the higher the educational attainment, the more likely a person is to participate (see Figure 1.).

(Figure not available.)

Looking at the United States as an example, only 11 per cent of those with a primary education or less participate in adult education and training, compared with 64 per cent among those with a university education.

The long arm of the family -- as reflected in the relationship between social background, educational attainment and participation in adult education -- is noticeable in each of the countries, but seems stronger in some than in others.

Figure 1, shows that the differences in likelihood between those with a very short education and those with a university degree are particularly large in the USA and Australia. The likelihood of Americans with a university degree participating in some form of adult education and training is 15.7 times higher than that of Americans with a primary education. In the Netherlands and Sweden, the differences between those with little previous education and those with extensive education are smaller than in the other countries. In Sweden, the high level of participation and somewhat lower level of inequality might be explained by the country's long history of adult education. Other important factors are a large publicly funded voluntary sector and funding earmarked for recruiting groups with low readiness to participate. This involves funds for outreach activities at work and in the community and study assistance for long and short courses. In the Netherlands there has been an attempt in recent years to strengthen the adult education sector and to find new ways to combine private initiatives with the committed involvement of social partners. Thus, the data suggest that while the long arm of the family will always be present, public policy can somewhat reduce its impact on readiness to participate in adult education and training. Further, a realistic policy on lifelong learning for all must be based on an understanding that, thanks to the long arm of the family, not all adults are ready to make use of existing opportunities for education and training. If a strategy's point of departure is the notion that adults are completely self-directed individuals in possession of the tools necessary to seize on adult education opportunities then that strategy is doomed to widen, not narrow, the educational and cultural gaps in society.

IALS data on participation and everyday learning confirm an influence perhaps best characterized as "the long arm of the job": the increased importance of adult education and training as investment. The increase in employer-supported activities is a dramatic change that has radically altered the landscape of adult education over the last two decades.

About half of all participants attend an employer-supported course. The importance of the employer is particularly striking in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the U.K. two out of three participate in a course supported by the employer. While employer-supported education reaches a large number of people, the duration is substantially shorter than for non-employer-supported activities. In all countries, women benefit less often than men do from employer support for their education; they must instead rely on alternate sources -- mainly, self-financing.

The strong influence of the world of work is also evident in motives to engage in education and training. Not only do participants supported by their employer almost exclusively give job-related motives but also a large proportion of participants in courses not sponsored by their employer report reasons linked to job and career. This is particularly the case in the Anglo-Saxon countries

As adult education becomes increasingly linked to work, strategies for lifelong learning for all must recognize the inequality in receiving employer support for education and training. It is also important to consider how the work setting frames the nature and quality of everyday learning taking place, and the extent to which it fosters a readiness to seek non-employer-supported education. The analyses show that the likelihood of an employee receiving some support for education and training from the employer is related to the size of the company that one happens to be working in, occupational status and the engagement in literacy activities at work. In general, it is a handicap to work in a small or medium- sized company when it comes to benefiting from employer-supported education and training. There is a very clear relationship between occupational status and employer support for education and training. Factors like size of company and occupational status are mainly a proxy for situations at work that influence training decisions but do not say anything about the actual nature of the job and the training needs that are associated with it. It is therefore of interest to look closer at the relationship between reported use of literacy at work extent of employer supported education and training. The study reveals a strong connection between employer support and the use of literacy on the job. The more demands that are made on the use of literacy skills the more likely it is that the employer will invest in an employee's education and training.

These findings shift the discussion on a strategy for lifelong learning for all from a narrow supply question to a demand issue. Both the employer's willingness to support an individual's learning activities and the person's own incentive for investing in learning are strongly influenced by the actual opportunity to use literacy skills at work. Persons outside the labour market or in undemanding jobs are clearly up against a barrier with regard to both learning itself and their readiness for it. This, in combination with the fact that publicly funded adult education is increasingly related to work and employer support, is the reality in which a strategy for lifelong learning for all must be grounded.

The overall conclusion is that every country in the IALS study faces major challenges in extending lifelong learning to the least qualified. The large numbers of adults with a low literacy level are a ticking time bomb. Worse, the analyses reveal that these people, who are most in need of expanding their learning, seldom participate in adult education and training and spend little time engaged in everyday reading either at or outside work. The problem goes beyond disadvantaged groups not participating in learning that can improve their situation; they often also find themselves in contexts at or outside work that do not stimulate a readiness to engage in learning. Thus, before discussing policy options, it is necessary to begin with a basic assumption: lifelong learning for all can only be achieved in a society that actively engages and make demands on the literacy skills of *all* its citizens Lifelong learning for all . It is conditional on a working life organized in a way that promotes the use of literacy, and a society where people are encouraged to think, act, and be engaged.

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