

How human capital theory justifies changes in literacy proficiency requirements for entry and naturalization

HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS OR ECONOMIC PRIORITIES

The media depiction of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau welcoming Syrian refugees entering Canada portrays our nation as a country that prioritizes our humanitarian concerns for human welfare above economic priorities. However, when it comes to policy reform, economic priorities seem to take precedence, particularly with regard to the changes in literacy proficiency requirements for entry and citizenship. Indeed, before leaving office, the previous government, led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, introduced stricter language proficiency requirements to enter and become a citizen of Canada. The points system was transformed into an express entry system in which language proficiency became the most significant point category (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2017; Government of Canada, 2016). The Conservative government made proof of language proficiency a requirement for citizenship, in addition to the interview and written test (Government of Canada, 2014; Government of Canada, 2015; Ibbotson, 2014).

The rationale for stricter language proficiency policies stems from an assumption of human capital theory (HCT) that high literacy proficiency in the official language of the country is a key indicator of economic success. These assumptions are justified using literacy surveys, specifically the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). This survey establishes a key correlation between literacy and social mobility (Statistics Canada, 2011; Gibb & Walker, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD],

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2013). This essay explores the criticism of how HCT is used to shape immigration policy.

RAISING SKILL SETS

HCT is based on the assumption that the skill sets of every individual, such as literacy, are forms of human capital. High proficiency in capital such as literacy enables individuals to be economically productive and socially mobile (OECD, 2013, p. 118; OECD, 1996). Low proficiency leads individuals to be dependent on social services and unable to meet the needs of a changing economy (Grubel, 2013). Consequently, it is to every country’s advantage to raise the skill sets of their citizens to maximize economic prosperity and reduce reliance on social services.

To illustrate the correlation between human capital and social mobility, the OECD and Statistics Canada implemented a survey to measure literacy proficiency and other skills connected to economic success. The literacy section is known as the IALS and has been administered in OECD member countries three times over the last three decades (Walker & Rubenson, 2014). The survey involves completing a variety of literacy tasks that are ranked into five levels based on proficiency. Level 3 represents the literacy skills the OECD believes are necessary to compete in a knowledge-based economy (Statistics Canada, 2011; Grenier et al., 2008). In the most recent IALS survey, Canada’s

score was 273—three points shy of a level 3. The lowest scores came from immigrants, Aboriginal people, and older adults (ages 35 to 65). From their findings, the OECD made two policy recommendations: first, countries like Canada should increase support of adult literacy education programs; and second, countries like Canada should continue to develop selective immigration policies that increase the demand for immigrants with literacy proficiency in the country’s official language (OECD, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2013).

CRITICIZING HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

There are three main criticisms associated with the use of an HCT framework in policy. The first is that literacy may not be as significant an indicator of economic success as the OECD suggests. Even though there is a correlation between those who scored high on the literacy tests and income, overall, countries with high immigrant populations and high GDPs such as Canada, the United States, and Britain had average to low literacy scores (World Bank, 2015; OECD, 2013). This suggests that other factors may be significant to determining economic success aside from literacy proficiency.

A second criticism of HCT is that it upholds the myth of meritocracy: that we all have equal access to social mobility. Using a critical discourse lens and Bourdieu’s concept of reproduction, these critics demonstrate that this is not the case (Heller, 2008). Instead, policies based on HCT arbitrarily privilege normative discourses of what it means to be

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Canadian. Such policies also make it more challenging for ethnic minorities to gain entry and citizenship (Black & Yasukawa, 2014; Burkholder & Filion, 2014; Fleming, 2015). The selectivity of the express entry system also allows the government in power to shape its decisions of who will receive entry into the country based on their political ideology and economic values (Ibbitson, 2014).

The final criticism of HCT is that it supports a deficit perspective of literacy. Although surveys such as the IALS were constructed with the intention of avoiding the deficit perspective of seeing individuals as literate or illiterate, by insisting that level 3 is necessary for economic success, they have unwittingly reinforced a deficit perspective. Insisting that a level 3 represents the level needed to succeed in an advanced economic society sets a high standard for countries to aspire to—one that is not easily achieved and that requires significant investment, which a nation's government may not be prepared to make. Indeed, when the Conservative government chose to shut down COPIAN, Canada's leading source of adult education research funding, Alexandra Fortier, spokesperson for then Employment and Social Development Minister Jason Kenney, referred to poor performance on the IALS as the main reason (Goar, 2014).


Insisting on level 3 proficiency also raises the bar expected of immigrants, who are now required to do more standardized tests to find a pathway to citizenship. This creates a narrative that portrays immigrants as a threat to the nation's wealth and fails to recognize the other forms of capital they bring to the country (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 224). Moreover, standardized surveys provide a narrow understanding of their participants' literacy abilities. The IALS survey questions focus on being a consumer; they do not take into account dialect and socio-cultural practices that are related to the local practices of the individual taking the test. This perspective does not reflect current socio-

cultural theories of literacy learning, which conceptualize literacy as context-based and socially situated practices (St. Clair, 2012).

To conclude, education policies must recognize the limitations of HCT to better support our humanitarian priorities. Stricter literacy proficiency requirements impact whether immigrants will be able to make Canada their homeland, be barred from entry, or remain foreign nationals. From the perspective of an adult educator, providing opportunities to receive instruction in the official language of the country is the best way to balance our economic and humanitarian priorities. In addition, these programs need to be spaces to address the criticisms of HCT and reflect the most innovative understandings of literacy and second-language acquisition. This involves continuing to develop and support adult literacy programming that is sensitive and responsive to the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the individuals it serves rather than merely reproductive of existing normative discourses. Such an approach can expand the narrative beyond characterizing immigrants as financial burdens or financial opportunities to treating them as individuals who contribute to the cultural and social fabric of our nation. 🍁

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accept single male refugees from Syria. Although there is room for stronger gender-aware policy, the Liberal Party of Canada offers reason to believe the Muskoka Initiative will at least include funding for abortion in countries where it is legal. However, this is the bare minimum of what should be done by the Canadian government to address issues like maternal mortality and global gender inequality. 

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