

# Traditional methods may improve classroom learning

*Margaret Bird - September 2023*

Even though Sweden is ranked ninth on the list of the best countries for education worldwide, this did not prevent it from retreating from the step of digitizing education back to school books, as they realized the importance of books in students' lives.

The center-right government has announced that it will release 685 million kronor (\$84.7 million Canadian) this year and 500 million kronor (\$61.8 million Canadian) annually in 2024 and 2025 to speed up the return of textbooks to schools. The goal is to ensure one book for every student, and for every subject, to bypass the era of screens in educational schools and return to textbooks. Meanwhile, the government's desire to return to textbooks coincides with the will of Swedish citizens, who prefer reading paper books at the expense of e-books. According to a survey on daily media use in Sweden, more than 40 per cent of respondents read books every day, despite the number of e-book releases that have quadrupled in the past decade.

However, it is not possible to talk about modern education without democracy. The real obstacle to bringing about deep reform in the educational organization goes beyond the modernization of the education institutes.<sup>1</sup>

Children, today, no longer know how to write cursively, nor are they able, for the most part, to even write at all by hand. More importantly, they are no longer able to read cursive writing!

In Canada, you can leave school when you are 16. If you are between six and 16, you must go to school unless you have already graduated from high school or have been excused because of an illness or other cause. Canadian high school dropout rates average five to 14 per cent and increase to as high as 50 per cent or more, in low-income communities?<sup>2</sup>

There is no national strategy in Sweden for preventing early leaving from upper secondary education, but there's mandatory attendance between six–seven and 15 to 16 years of age. The Swedish government has though determined that it is particularly important that municipalities are well informed of the situation of early school leavers.<sup>3</sup> In Sweden, 29 per cent of full-time bachelor's students had not graduated and were no longer enrolled in tertiary education by the theoretical end of their programme.<sup>4</sup>

All countries have different approaches to education and their individual researches bring forward very different results. Sweden is a country built around staunch equality and community spirit, which directly influences their school system, where children are taught the same subjects until they are old enough to make their own education and career choices.<sup>5</sup> Maybe Canada offers too much freedom in this area and perhaps that is why so many youths return to college after university, because they haven't yet found their path?

Go ahead, read a story online (or two or three). But if you really need to learn something, you're probably better off with print. Or at least that's what a lot of research now suggests. Many studies have shown that when people read on-screen, they don't understand what they've read as well as when they read in print. Even worse, many don't realize they're not getting it. Students often think they learn more from reading online. When tested, though, it turns out that they actually learned less than when reading in print. The question is: Why?

To understand text, the brain borrows networks that evolved to do other things. For example, the part that evolved to recognize faces is called into action to recognize letters. This is similar to how you might adapt a tool for some new use. For example, a coat hanger is great for putting your clothes in the closet. But if a blueberry rolls under the refrigerator, you might straighten out the coat hanger and use it to reach under the fridge and pull out the fruit. You've taken a tool made for one thing and adapted it for something new. That's what the brain does when you read. It's great that the brain is so flexible. It's one reason we can learn to do so many new things. But that flexibility can be a problem when it comes to reading different types of texts. When we read online, the brain creates a different set of connections between cells from the ones it uses for reading in print. It basically adapts the same tool again for the new task. This is like if you took a coat hanger and instead of straightening it out to fetch a blueberry, you twisted it into a hook to unclog a drain -- same original tool, two very different forms.

As a result, the brain might slip into skim mode when you're reading on a screen. BUT, it may switch to deep-reading mode when you turn to print.<sup>6</sup>

This fall, in Canada, Education Minister Stephen Lecce is reintroducing cursive writing into our schools, saying that it's about more than just teaching students how to sign their own name.

“The research has been very clear that cursive writing is a critical life skill in helping young people to express more substantively, to think more critically, and ultimately, to express more authentically,” he said in an interview.

Will the return of all the old textbooks be enough to raise the academic level of children everywhere – Swedish or Canadian? What an interesting debate for us all to consider!

\*Sources Extracts: 1Al-Estiklal Newspaper; 2pathwaystoeducation.ca; 3 Europa.eu; 4oecd.org; 5internations.org; 6Avery Elizabeth Hurt