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# **Conceptualizing Public Library Service to Newcomers in Canada**

## **Abstract:**

This doctoral dissertation research examines the historical development of public library services to newcomers in the context of immigration related policies such as settlement and multiculturalism (1945-2011). The analysis focuses on the ways that immigrants have been constituted in government and library policies and on the nature of services provided to them.

## **Résumé:**

Cette thèse de doctorat porte sur le développement des services en bibliothèque publique s'adressant aux nouveaux arrivants dans le contexte de politiques liées à l'immigration, notamment l'établissement et le multiculturalisme (1945-2011). L'analyse porte sur les façons dont les immigrants ont été constitués dans les politiques du gouvernement des bibliothèques et sur la nature des services qui leur étaient offerts.

## **Extended Abstract:**

This doctoral dissertation research examines the historical development of public library services to newcomers in the context of immigration related policies such as settlement and multiculturalism (1945-2011). The analysis focuses on the ways that immigrants have been constituted in government and library policies and on the nature of services provided to them.

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, voluntary agencies provided aid to immigrants in reception, welfare, settlement and adjustment services to fill gaps unattended by governments (Hawkins, 1972). In the 1970s, the federal government introduced a new Immigration Act (1976), which recognized the dramatic shifts in the ethnic and cultural composition of Canada's population and the demands for a fair immigration policy by newly politicized minority immigrant groups (George, 2006). In this regard, a series of policies and programs related to the integration of immigrants were also introduced including the Multiculturalism policy in 1971, and, in 1974, the Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program (ISAP), through which settlement services in interpretation and translation, information and referral, and counselling and support were offered to eligible immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2011). While eligibility for ISAP services includes permanent residents of Canada, refugee claimants<sup>1</sup> and those with Canadian citizenship are excluded (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> Refugee claimants whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined are not eligible.

For many years this system of service delivery proved successful “in promoting economic integration as the key to successful settlement of newcomers” (Richmond & Shields, 2005, p 515). In 2003, however, a Statistics Canada study found that since the 1980s low-income rates for immigrants (both recent and established) were increasing while the reverse was true for the Canadian-born (Picot & Hou, 2003). Immigrant settlement sector advocates argue that Canada’s model of service delivery was flawed primarily because it “focuses on the early stages of adaptation, in spite of the fact that the process of settlement continues throughout the life of the newcomer” (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003, p 8). That immigrants to Canada have “poverty rates three times higher than Canadians, despite their high levels of education” (Jiménez, 2007, para 2) is a problem that needs to be taken seriously by all aspects of Canadian society including public libraries.

Canada’s contemporary response to the problems of immigrant integration, similar to national governments such as those in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and Australia, has been in turning to cities and municipalities to administer immigrant settlement policies and programs (Siemiatycki & Triadafilopoulos, 2010). In this regard, there has been interest in the particular role that public libraries, as municipal institutions, play in immigrant settlement and integration in Canada (Frissen & Wallace, 2000), the United States (Ashton & Milam, 2008; Holt, 2009), and Europe (Špačková & Štefková, 2006). Academic research in this area has aimed to demonstrate that public libraries address a range of settlement issues, both short and long-term, through the provision of information, services and resources, and the potential opportunities that public library spaces afford immigrants in developing social networks and participating in the broader society (Audunson, Essmat & Aabo, 2011; Caidi & Allard, 2005; Fisher et al., 2004). In an increasingly multicultural world, however, Muddiman (1990) observes that the greatest weakness of the library’s service philosophy “is its inflexibility and its insistence on the primary of a uniform service in an increasingly segmented and diversified world” (p 90). In Canada, where an official national policy on multiculturalism exists, “there is evidence that a commitment to multiculturalism in libraries is waning” (Nilsen, 2001, p 103). In Ontario, for example, public libraries struggled with how to implement multiculturalism beyond multilingual collections (Davies et al., 1981).

In 2008, Citizenship and Immigration Canada formally launched the ISAP-funded Library Settlement Partnerships (LSP) program in which partnerships between public libraries and immigrant serving organizations were established across the province of Ontario. Settlement workers are being placed in public libraries to offer settlement services with the understanding that many new immigrants use libraries when they first arrive in Canada (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2008). The problem of immigrant integration had once been defined as one of systemic inequality in access to services that resulted from a lack of coordination and integration between service providers (Yelaja, 1990). Where “mainstream agencies on the whole did not take into account the needs and interests of minority groups in their service delivery” (Burnaby, 1992, p129). More recently, however, the responsibility for integration has shifted to individuals where the problem is being framed as a lack of awareness about settlement services (Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, 2003) and the consequent decision to increase visibility of services in public venues such as libraries. That responsibility for integration remains with immigrants is also in line with critiques of neoliberal immigration and integration

policies that have emphasized the selection of immigrants who are 'self-sufficient' (Abu-Laban, 1998) or, the expectation that immigrants should conform to Canadian society rather than challenge it (Li, 2003).

This begs the question: What alternative framings of the problem of immigrant integration in Canada exist? In particular, how does the public library, in light of being prescribed a role in a government program such as LSP, constitute the contemporary problem of immigrant integration? Further, how does the concept of 'multiculturalism' contribute to reducing or maintaining inequality in access to public library services? As this critical analysis of historical documents progresses, these and other questions will be addressed.

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