ABSTRACT: This article presents some major research themes and findings of the leading Swedish research group in the field of literacy in history. The informal and encouraging leadership of Professor Egil Johansson was of vital importance to the creativity and productivity of the group. Prior to 1985, a few large projects on Swedish alphabetization were closely inter-related to the development of methods and resources. After 1985, research benefitted from the competence represented by the Demographic Data Base, the Swedish Archival Information, and the Research Archives. The thematic variety of the second period was promoted by the multi-disciplinary composition of the research group. Religious instruction was the primary focus of interest, and cross-cultural, multi-confessional, and comparative aspects were incorporated. The international orientation became a constitutive characteristic, contextualizing the Swedish Lutheran experience. Literacy skills, textual history, literacy practices, and print culture signify the general evolution of themes.

KEYWORDS: Egil Johansson, Umeå University, historiography, research organization, literacy studies, popular education, religious instruction, textual history, literacy practices, print culture.

Introduction

Background, Structure, and Composition of the Research Group

The history of popular education in Sweden is a field of research that has been closely identified with Professor Egil Johansson of Umeå University. Beginning his professional career as a Lutheran minister in 1960, Egil Johansson struggled with the teaching mission of the Church of Sweden in a decade when most traditional authorities were challenged, including the state church and Martin Luther's Small Catechism. While the majority of his clerical colleagues resorted to modern educational technology, Johansson embarked on a search for the
historical roots of Christian teaching. His discovery of the catechetical examination registers in local church archives was a critical event that initiated a systematic analysis of this neglected source. The fundamental task was to prove the usefulness of the church records to a skeptical community of social historians and educators. Egil Johansson’s dissertation in educational studies, defended at Umeå University in 1972, convincingly demonstrated the reliability of these church records, and successfully employed new methods for quantitative use of the materials. From then on, Johansson’s academic career had a double focus: the development of methods and resources to improve the availability of historical records on the one hand, and empirical research in the field of popular education in history on the other. In 1977, Egil Johansson became a full professor of educational studies, a position he left in 1981 to direct the research section of the Demographic Data Base. In 1984, Johansson was appointed professor of the history of popular education at the Research Archives. Ten years later his professorship was transferred to the Department of Religious Studies, where he remained until his retirement in 1998.

The research of Egil Johansson has been presented before (Lindmark, 1998a), but this article represents the first attempt to sketch the research group that Johansson directed for almost three decades. From the early 1970s up to the late 1990s, Johansson conducted research projects investigating various aspects of popular education in history. Even though many students and scholars were involved in these projects, the research activities were never manifested in a permanent structure. Instead, the informal research group fertilized different institutions, such as the Department of Education, the Demographic Data Base, the Research Archives, and the Department of Religious Studies. Moving from one institution to the other, Johansson brought with him ongoing projects and initiated new research in support of the development of the current organization. This support was clearly manifested in the various report series that were founded. The publications of the research group dominated the series Urkunden and Scriptum of the Research Archives and the series Alphabeta Varia: Album Religionum Umense at the Department of Religious Studies.

The absence of a formal structure offered a freedom and flexibility that nurtured creativity. This independence was an invaluable asset as it enabled the research group to exist in different forms for almost three decades. At the same time, the absence of a permanent structure turned out to be a weakness, since the research group was totally dependent upon external funding for its projects. The increasingly interdisciplinary