A Policy of Individualization and Flexibility Ignoring the Situation of Non-self-Reliant Individuals: The Example of Swedish Basic Adult Education.

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Abstract

Based on a case study in Swedish municipal basic adult education this article addresses current policies for providing individualized and flexible learning, which have been reinforced in recent adult education reforms. Concepts from the organization theory of "action nets" have been used. Institutionalized procedures and a number of "organizing knots" have been identified. The results display a paradox in relation to the policy imperatives of individualization and flexibility: successful individualized and flexible studies show to be quite strictly conditioned. We provide different aspects of how students connect strongly to this rigorous learning design and perform well, but also confirm results of previous studies which show how such study forms require an "individual self-reliant learner". However, not all students act and participate in accordance with the institutionalized procedures. We identify a significant lack of organizing knots for a group of young students, who had recently arrived in Sweden without any of their family members and who encounter difficulties in pursuing their studies and need educational support. We discuss how this is related to the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, Ch. 2, §26) that states that professional and psychological support, health care and special needs is optional in municipal adult education, and argue that the current policy of Swedish adult education with the reinforced "individualized perspective" actually ignores the context and life situations of many individuals.

Keywords

Basic adult education, individualized and flexible study forms, action net, organizing knots, neo-liberal policy, newly arrived young immigrants

Introduction

Since the early 1990s the Swedish educational system has undergone profound changes as part of neo-liberal political reforms. In compulsory and upper secondary education a student voucher system and publicly funded independent schools have established a school market (Beach & Dovemark 2011; Erixon Arreman & Holm 2011). In adult education this is matched by a quasi-market tendering processes (Beach 2004; Henning Loeb 2007). Another cornerstone in the shift of education policy during the 1990s was management by objectives, and a transfer of power to local and individual levels (Lundahl et al 2013). This has implied an array of curriculum possibilities varying according to the interest of the students (cf. Englund 2005), but as shown in research conducted on educational practices in the compulsory school and upper secondary education the development has led to an emphasis on personal responsibility (Beach and Dovemark 2009; Francia 2013). It is argued by Carlgren et al (2006, p. 19) that:

> [t]he language of teaching has been replaced by a language of learning, together with an emphasis on individuals... A specific Neo-liberal educational policy—with the individual self-reliant learner at the centre—together with social constructivist learning theories, seem, however, to be the main forces for individualised teaching and learning today.

The focus of this article is on a specific part of the Swedish educational system which has been significantly exposed to policy initiatives of individualization and flexibility since the late 1990s (Wass 2004; Henning Loeb 2007; Andersson & Wärvik 2012), but that so far lacks empirical studies: Basic adult education. Adult education in Sweden is provided by municipalities as a corresponding institutionalized system to the compulsory comprehensive and upper secondary school. Basic adult education today has a vast majority of students born abroad (Skolverket 2014a) – 91%. Given the current mobility features due to refugeeism and global conflict, these figures are not likely to decrease.

In the latest reform of municipal adult education, which was part of the new Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and involved a new Ordinance on Adult Education (SFS 2011:1108), the individualized perspective was

again reinforced. As formulated in the fact sheet "Adult education and training in Sweden" from the Ministry of Education and Research (2013), municipal adult education is to be "based on the needs and requirements of the individual" and "each student is also to receive an individual study plan, based on the abilities and life situation of the individual". It is also stated that "accessibility and flexibility as regards time and location must be a major feature of the adult education and training system".

Aims and scope of the article

This article draws on results from field studies conducted in a specific educational setting in basic adult education. This setting was recommended to us as a highly successful educational provider, the teacher team had been awarded a prize for its way of carrying out individualized and flexible studies. Our interest was to analyze the organizing of teaching and learning. We had two basic questions: (i) How is the teaching and learning organized and (ii) what educational challenges can be identified when things do not run smoothly? The latter question was of specific interest as the new Education Act strengthened professional and psychological support, health care and special needs (SFS 2010:800, Ch. 2, §25) for all other school forms, but it was only optional in municipal adult education (SFS 2010:800, Ch. 2, §26). With the referred political ambitions above in mind that municipal adult education is to be "based on the needs and requirements of the individual" and "each student is also to receive an individual study plan, based on the abilities and life situation of the individual", an investigation on how individualized and flexible studies is materialised and mediated in a local site is legitimate.

A brief overview of municipal adult education and basic adult education

Since 1968, Sweden has provided public education for adults via the municipal adult education system. Initially the aim was to provide "a second chance" for adults who had not had the opportunity to obtain nine years of compulsory education in the modern school system or to complete their upper secondary education. Today, 17% of the students in municipal adult education are studying in the basic adult education

system (Skolverket 2014a). This percentage has been quite steady over time. However, the backgrounds of the students in basic adult education have changed significantly. In the 1970s, courses were primarily attended by native Swedes seeking to develop their education to a level equivalent to the new compulsory nine-year school. They comprised "people working in their home", "workers", and "part-time workers" (cf. Olofsson & Rubenson 1986, p. 75). These categories are not found in the tables of the twenty-first century. The categories of today are "women" and people who have been "born abroad". Indeed, in 2013, 91% of the students in basic adult education were born abroad (Skolverket 2014a).

The two most common courses in modern basic adult education reflect this change. These are Swedish as a second language (37%) and compulsory school-level English (23%) (Skolverket 2014b). For most students, basic adult education is the next step in their education after having completed their Swedish tuition for immigrants and precedes upper secondary school studies in municipal adult education, which must be completed to achieve eligibility for higher education and studies in higher vocational education. The investigation on which this article is based focuses on a group of students of this type who were participating in a "Swedish as a second language" course.

Newly arrived young immigrants

Basic adult education students are typically a rather heterogeneous group (cf. Elmeroth 2003; Carlson 2006). As such, their life histories, current life situations and study contexts often vary widely. An example of a specific group in focus here is newly arrived young immigrants. These usually comprise young men in their early 20s who have recently arrived to Sweden as immigrants travelling without their parents or other family members. They are likely to become increasingly common in the basic adult education system in the coming years. Statistics from the Swedish Migration Board (Migrationsverket 2014) show that their numbers have grown in recent years, from 2,250 in 2009 to 2,393 in 2010, 2,657 in 2011, 3,578 in 2012, and 3,852 in 2013. The estimation is that by 2015 there will be about 4,400 children without parents per year seeking asylum in Sweden. The group consists of youngsters rather than

small children, e.g. most of the newly arrived young immigrants who arrived in 2012 were young men from Afghanistan and Somalia between the ages of 15 and 16 (Migrationsverket 2013).

There has been considerable political interest in this growing number of young people seeking asylum in Sweden: their needs are currently being investigated from several angles, and various suggestions have been put forward to address their needs (cf. Skolverket 2012; DS 2013:6). This political interest, together with the recent legislation governing support structures such as health care services and special needs provision, can be at least partly said to meet the shortcomings in the Swedish school system identified by Bunar (2010), who studied the learning conditions for newly arrived students in compulsory school and upper secondary education. His conclusion was that the engagement of individual actors has a strong effect on the likelihood that a given student will have a successful educational trajectory. He was strongly critical of the lack of organizational strategies and institutional co-operation. Up until now, the focus on newly arrived young immigrants in education and research in Sweden has exclusively centered on pupils in compulsory school and upper secondary education. As language acquisition takes several years (Cummins 2000; Collier & Thomas 2007), many in this group are likely to become students in the adult education system. As will be shown, this is also the case of the group of young men in this study.

The educational setting, theoretical framework and methodology

The educational setting we have studied is in a middle-sized municipality (about 60 000 inhabitants). It is situated in a newly repaired building close to the city center. Upper secondary school programs and adult education at basic, upper secondary, and post upper secondary level, are located here. The course under study, Swedish as a second language, is part of basic adult education and has around 60 students. More than 20 non-Swedish nationalities are represented. Most students are between 20 and 40 years old, but there are also older students. The teacher team consists of three teachers. Two have been involved since the setting was established in 2004; the third joined two years later.

The setting was chosen since it corresponded with our criteria of being considered as successful in organizing individualized and flexible education. The team had been nominated for awards in the professional field of Swedish adult education. Our considerations were also based on evaluations of the students, completion- and dropout rates, and conversations with professionals in the educational field. Access was gained through contacts with the principal as well as with the teacher team.

The field studies were conducted during the span of one year, as the reinforced individualized policy was being launched. The methodology was inspired by Czarniawska's examples of shadowing and other techniques for doing fieldwork (Czarniawska 2007). We have attended classes on nine occasions, most often all day. During these visits, we had continuous informal talks with the students and teachers during breaks. We also interviewed the teacher team on three occasions and carried out individual interviews with five students. In addition, we interviewed the principal, the director of studies and the student counselor.

The interviews with the students were conducted by one of the researchers, while both researchers took part of the interviews of the teacher team, the supervisor, the director of studies and the student counselor. All interviews were held in Swedish. These interviews, together with notes from our field studies and collected teaching materials, form the empirical base for the analysis.As a complement, we have acquired knowledge from documents such as attendance lists and tables of outcomes and categorizations of drop-outs. We have had access to a web-portal - Fronter - with the possibility of accessing documents and tasks.

Due to our interest in ways of organizing education, our studies have been conducted with a basis in organizational studies, inspired by studies of action nets, as outlined by Czarniawska (2004; 2008). This theoretical approach gives a possibility to study what Fenwick and Edwards (2011) refer to as the 'material aspects of policy enactments' and 'stabilizing mechanisms'. This analytical approach and concepts

which we have used in order to provide a picture of the individualized and flexible learning in the educational setting is affiliated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT). However, in contrast to ANT, where the analysis focuses on the network as an effect – something that has already happened – the concept of action net focuses on how actions are being established or re-established (Czarniawska, 2004). As argued by Czarniawska (2008) and others, organizing is an ongoing process, and this is what researchers should pay attention to. This corresponds to the argumentation of Law (1994) where he stresses the importance to study 'organizing' instead of organization, i.e. a focus on ongoing processes instead of 'objects' or 'products'.

Studies on action nets draws on Berger and Luckmann's ideas about institutions and institutionalization (1966). Institutionalization occurs when actions are frequently repeated into a pattern and become habitualized. As argued by Czarniawska (Czarniawska 2008), institutionalization implies repeated collective actions that are connected to other repeated collective actions. We therefore sought to identify places or points at which repeated actions are performed and set out to analyse how these actions are connected to other actions (cf. Czarniawska 2004, p. 783). This was accomplished by a systematic reading of our field notes together with interpretations of what the informants had told us in the interviews. The analysis resulted in the identification of a number of organizing knots. With this analytical focus, these organizing knots are crucial because they stabilize the educational setting; more precisely, these are where the individualization and flexibility of the educational setting is institutionalized.

The organizing knots are presented in the first part of the results section, and we show how they are connected to one-another. In this way we depict the everyday ways of organizing of teaching and learning in this specific pedagogic practice.

This first part of the results section also sheds light on how different kinds of connections provide stability to the individualized and flexible educational setting. As identified by Lindberg & Czarniawska (2006), there are three kinds of connections: cognitive, emotional and mimetic.

Cognitive connections are formed when information is understood. In our study, elaborated learning material and instructions enable the formation of such connections. Emotional connections are formed when the participants interact with one-another and establish a shared understanding, creating a sense of loyalty. Mimetic connections refer to processes of imitation. New students follow the example of senior students and mimic their actions.

Not all students act and participate in accordance with the institutionalized procedures. In the second part of the results section educational challenges are identified and we show how the stability of the action net is strained. We identify a lack of organizing knots for students who encounter difficulties in pursuing their studies and need educational support. This finding is very concerning to us. It is linked to the current adult education policy. The implications of this policy are critically addressed in the discussion section and the conclusions of the paper.

Outline of the results

The following section presents the results of our studies and is divided into two parts. The first deals with the way in which individualization and flexibility are achieved in practice. The organizing knots and their interconnections are presented and discussed, and the character of the connections and their importance for the institutionalized procedures is identified. The second part focuses on students who do not take part in the institutional procedures in the same way as most others. We show how this presents a challenge to the teachers and the stability of the setting. We provide contextual information about these students and their life situations and then introduce some arguments as to why teacher care and support is not sufficient to support disadvantaged young adults' connections to education. In the conclusion, we express strong concerns regarding current Swedish policies and legislation relating to individualized and flexible adult education.

Detailed results and analysis
Part I. The action net and the organizing knots

In this first part of the results chapter we show the action net and the

organizing knots. Consequently, there is an emphasis on the repeated actions that define the institutionalized procedures. This is presented in three steps. First, the identified organizing knots are described individually. Second, the connections between these organizing knots and those between the different actions are described. Finally, the character of the connections (i.e. the way in which students connect to and become committed to their studies) are analyzed. Seven organizing knots were identified: the schedule, the dual structure of the classes, the self-instructed study guides, the web-portal Fronter, the weekly test, the individual study plan and the introduction of new students.

The schedule

The first organizing knot is the schedule. The schedule is the same every week. It involves twelve classes directed towards developing skills in listening comprehension, writing, conversation and grammar. Students can select which classes to attend depending on which skills they need to develop. However, they are not free to come and go as they please. Firstly, to be a full-time student on this course, one is required to attend at least eight classes each week. Secondly, as a student, one has to decide which classes are to be prioritized.

Students can attend other classes if they so desire, provided that there is sufficient classroom space. This means that if you have been prevented from participating in the classes you have chosen, you can catch up by going to others. However, by leaving the individual with diverse options, the schedule makes students responsible for organizing their own studies and also commits them to their studies by forcing them to attend classes they have prioritized.

The actions that take place every Thursday morning are particularly salient in this context. There is an obligatory class at this time involving individual supervision from an appropriate tutor. The class is organized into individual study sessions, and one by one the students leave the classroom to speak with the teacher. Here they discuss their progress and results, and can ask the teacher questions. This is also when the teachers decide whether the student can or cannot attend the weekly test on Friday afternoon. This Friday test is an organizing knot that we

will return to later.

The dual structure of the classes

As mentioned above, the content of the course is spread over four areas and involves listening comprehension, writing, conversation and grammar. There are two classes per week covering each area, and some additional classes such as the obligatory supervision class. Every class is divided into two parts – the first is led by the teacher while the second involves individual work.

The dual structure of the education facilitates different kinds of actions. During the first part, the group works collectively on different tasks connected to the subject. This can include, for instance, listening comprehension, developing pronunciation skills, going through different grammatical items, and discussing certain issues in smaller groups. The teacher has a prominent role in monitoring discussions and interacting with the students. Thus, flexible and individual studies do not mean, in this context, only working on your own all the time.

The self-instructed study guides

Over the years, the teachers have developed comprehensive study and training materials that enable the students to study individually and at their own pace. The study material contains self-instructed study guides that are connected to textbooks. Each chapter in the textbooks has a separate study guide. The study guides provide detailed information on the different tasks and are also connected to other material, such as a weekly newspaper or different listening comprehension CDs.

The study guides consist of different parts. Some tasks are corrected by the students themselves. Others are handed in to the teacher, and the teacher must sign the study guide to indicate that the task has been approved. Some larger tasks are to be corrected with comments from the teacher. Such texts are placed in a plastic folder placed on a table near the whiteboard. The teacher corrects the work and returns it to the students some days later, together with feedback on what to improve. This system of correcting and constructively commenting on individual tasks provides each student with many opportunities to receive

continuous feed-back. The students explained all of the steps to us, and highlighted the advantages of "the system", as they called it.

The web-portal Fronter

Another organizing knot is the web-portal known as Fronter. At the beginning of the course, the students are given a password and information on how to use the portal in order to study and work at distance. The portal contains most of the tasks that the students are obliged to do along with the course syllabus, the aims and guidelines for the course and the grading criteria. The main content of the portal, however, is the different study guides. This means that every written task that one finds in the physical classroom and that is stored in a cabinet can also be found in the virtual classroom, organized in different folders. This enables the student to work at home, in other places, or at school provided that they have a computer with access to the Internet. Fronter also has many files and links to internet-based material that the teachers have found beneficial for language learning.

The weekly test

Another organizing knot is the weekly test on Friday afternoons. This was mentioned earlier. When all of the tasks have been completed in one study guide, a test must be completed before moving on to the next study guide (i.e. the next chapter in the book). Altogether, there are nine tests. Regardless of which chapter is examined, the different tests occur at the same time and in the same classroom for all students. Full-time students are expected to finish a chapter and be tested every second week. Half-time students must plan to take a test every fourth week. After having worked through all the study guides and completed the associated tests, the student has achieved the goals of the course and will take a final test. This test is administered four times a year, roughly every three months.

The individual study plan

The individual study plan is a device that forms the most crucial organizing knot. When the student enrolls on the course, an individual study plan will already have been established in a meeting with their study counselor. This study plan is confirmed in the introduction of the

course, and the planned pace of the studies is discussed using this document as a base. Through the weekly supervision classes, the teachers constantly follow up the individual progress of each student. If necessary, the student's individual study plan is then revised in collaboration with the study counselor. The continuous talks with each student about his or her progress regarding the planned content and pace in the individual study plan are recurring actions.

The maximum length of the course is capped at one and a half years. If the student is incapable of completing the course within this period, their progress may have been hindered by other factors. The students can then be advised to terminate their studies, and, if possible, to return to them at a later date when they will have better opportunities to succeed.

The introduction of new students

The final organizing knot that we have identified is the introduction of new students into the educational setting. Most students enroll at the beginning of the semester and are introduced to all of its routines. However, when new students start the course during the semester, the teachers have found it important to not simply enroll them without providing detailed information and discussions about how to study in this individualized and flexible way. Instead, a teacher meets the new students in order to introduce the schedule, the structure of the classes and the way the students are expected to work. In these introduction sessions, the teacher also shows the students where they will find all of the instructional materials, the cabinet where everything is stored, and how Fronter works. After one or two of these introductory sessions, the new students can begin to attend the regular classes.

The connections between organizing knots

The organizing knots identified above are connected to each other by different kinds of actions. Here we provide examples of such connections. One example is the connections between the self-instructed study guides, the weekly test on Friday, the schedule and the individual study plan. The students have to complete the tasks in the self-instructed study guides and have this approved by the supervising tutor or they will not be able to participate in Friday's weekly test. The session to regulate

this, and thus check against the individual study plan, is held on the obligatory Thursday morning tutoring session in the schedule.

Another example is the connection between the weekly test and the individual study plan. The basis for this connection is the need to take the tests at the stipulated time. Failing to do this may result in difficulties in keeping up with the study timetable outlined in the individual study plan. Failure to take a test at the stipulated time may necessitate a revision of the study plan. Continuous action is required here because the students must constantly check their progress against their study plans.

A third example is the connections between the dual structure of the classes, the schedule and the individual study plan. These organizing knots are connected by the action of being present at classes that the student has prioritized in their individual study plan. The dual structure of the classes, in which the first part consists of teacher led activities, is arranged in ways that require the students' active participation. The actions of interacting and socializing are continuous in every class and are stipulated in the schedule. By talking to one-another and with the teachers, the students become connected to their studies. We will show aspects of this connecting in the following section.

Another example of an important knot is the connections between the web-portal Fronter, the schedule, the weekly tests and the self-instructed study guides. Although it is possible to study primarily as a distance student via Fronter without attending many classes, there are actions connecting this organizing knot to most of the other organizing knots. Students must get their assignments checked by the class teacher on Thursday in order to get approval to participate in the weekly test. They are then required to pass the test before moving on to use the next self-instructed study guide.

To sum up, the analysis conceptualizes a number of organizing knots which are connected to each other through various recurring actions that form institutionalized procedures in the educational setting. The examples show the complexities of the connections, and how many

actions connect the organizing knots in many different ways. The actions connecting the organizing knots are not only continuous and repetitive; they are also tightly connected to each other. This means that the students have options relating to some aspects of their studies, including the pace of the course, the number of classes attended, and the option of engaging in distance learning. However, having made these choices, they are fixed in the form of a plan that must be followed. For the individual student, an individualized and flexible study program doesn't mean that you are only individualized and flexible, you are also firmly regulated. The students must know what kinds of actions must be performed in order to complete their studies as expected.

The character of the connections

Following the analysis of Lindberg and Czarniawska (2006), connections can be conceptualized as being cognitive, emotional and mimetic. In our analysis, these concepts form the basis for the stability of the individualized and flexible educational setting.

The elaborate and supporting instructions and routines all enable cognitive connections, i.e. they help the students understand what is expected from them. We have described how the study guides with the extensive self-instructed material operate, the routines of the weekly session of individual supervision, and how the individual study plan is used as a tool for communication and understanding. These, and the thorough introduction of new students to the routines of the setting, enable cognitive connections.

Emotional connections were readily apparent when the students talked to us about the activities, the setting, the teachers, their learning and fellow students. They expressed their loyalty by telling us "how good it is" and how much they like it, and they show this in their interactions with the teachers and other students. They use words such as "professional", "helpful", "kind" and "wonderful" when describing the teachers.

The mimetic connections that stabilize the setting are, in our analysis, based on continuity and informal mentoring. Some students are in their third semester, others are newcomers. New students learn routines, procedures and strategies from experienced students who have

completed tasks in the study guides and can give advice to new students who are struggling.

We regard the mimetic connections in particular as being very important for the success of the individualized and flexible educational setting. Students follow each other's positive examples and ask each other questions. They imitate fellow students by observing what they do and how they act and behave.

Part II. A lack of organizing knots

We now turn to the challenges we have observed when students do not act and participate in accordance with the institutionalized procedures identified above. As already stated, in our study this is exemplified by a group of young students, who had recently arrived in Sweden without any of their family members. Before entering basic adult education, they had all participated in second language courses at an upper secondary school. This group of students did not form mimicking connections with the other students such as those discussed above. In addition, they did not take part in the institutional procedures as expected. For example, some were late to classes, failed to prepare their homework, or did not work at the pace stipulated in their individual study plan.

However, in the interviews they expressed their contentment with the educational setting. They speak highly of the teachers, emphasizing their willingness to help and the way they spent time explaining and giving advice on several issues, including those that were not related to educational matters. Thus, they are connected to the setting and the teachers in an emotional way. One student said:

> I don't know, there is something … They are always close to me, they care about me, they remind me about classes and they help me a lot. That's the way it is.

Another student had a similar view:

> You know … A teacher may have nothing to do with my problem, but still I can sit down with my teacher and tell about the problem I have, and she will help me, you know. She knows that I don't have anyone here. So she helps me.

The emotional connection is also illustrated in the clear distinction the students make between their studies in upper secondary education and in basic adult education. When describing the situation in upper secondary education, they describe the other students – and themselves – as being childish and immature. In adult education, they find themselves treated like adults, and talk about the responsibility of managing their own learning situation and the progress of their studies. They all describe themselves as motivated, with the ability to learn and with ambitious goals in terms of further study and their future occupation. These students also consider the study guides and other learning material to be of good quality and they are well aware of what is expected from them. This demonstrates the existence of a cognitive connection. In the interviews, they tended to avoid talking about problems with adapting to the routines or their responsibilities in this adult educational setting, or about how their personal situation affected their studies.

During our field work, we observed that the teachers put a lot of extra effort into guiding, structuring and following-up the activities of these students. This was also mentioned by the teachers during their interviews. They felt obliged to spend a lot of time and put considerable effort into practical things such as keeping track of books and other learning material. The teacher team explained it in this way:

> We have many individual talks with them. Then they have their planning, an individual paper that everybody gets, but they lose this every now and then, and you have to do a new one. You have to say, look here, now it is this week and you have not…Oh no! And then after a talk it feels like, okay, now they've got the point and then after two weeks, it is gone again. "Oops, should I have done this at that time?" I don't know how many plans I have given them… With the other students, we make a plan in the beginning of the semester, and then they keep to that, more or less. Here we have to copy, over and over again.

In terms of the conceptual framework, these actions put strain on and risk undermining the stability of the action net. However, the teachers also describe how these young adult students also have difficulties with

punctuality and sometimes have poor attendance at classes, and they stress how frequent talks with the students are necessary. The teachers and young men have meetings together with the study counselor and the principal in order to obtain a full picture of the situation and to find ways of improving their studies. The teachers and the study counselor all stated that this group of students has many experiences that negatively influence their studies. These include social and emotional problems related to experiences of war and being a refugee, and the challenges of living alone in a new country, far away from their family and relatives. Some of these young students also have considerable responsibilities towards their families in their home countries. Our observations show that the teachers devote a lot of time and effort to helping and supporting them, in both educational and personal terms. The teachers stress that this is a great challenge and how they often feel professionally inadequate, realizing the problems that these young men have to deal with. From our perspective, we identify a lack of organizing knots for these adult students with difficult life situations and different special educational needs.

Discussion

In this article, the individualized and flexible study forms of an educational setting in Swedish basic adult education have been examined. These are study forms that are in line with imperatives on individualized and flexible learning, which have been the Swedish educational policy since the middle of the 1990s. As we initially put forth, this individualized perspective has been reinforced in recent reforms of Swedish adult education. The studies in focus here have been conducted in a specific educational setting which was recommended to us as one that has been developed based on the principles of individualization and flexibility. The educational setting provides studies of Swedish as a second language in basic adult education and has more than 20 non-Swedish nationalities among the 60 students. Our field studies were guided by two research questions: (i) How is the teaching and learning organized and (ii) what educational challenges can be identified when things do not run smoothly?

Concepts from organizational theory have been used. Regarding the first

research question on how the teaching and learning is organized, the research shows how the setting is stabilized as individualized and flexible via a number of "organizing knots" that tie together an action net. By presenting this we show how the organizing of the educational setting is generally tight and firm. Thus, the results of the first research question on the organizing of teaching and learning display a paradox in relations to the policy imperatives of individualization and flexibility. As it turns out, successful, individualized and flexible studies, are actually quite strictly conditioned. The research shows that students cannot pursue their studies randomly, but need to participate in 'the whole net' in order to be successful in their individualized and flexible studies. The research confirms results of previous Nordic studies that individualized and flexible education requires an "individual self-reliant learner" (Carlgren et al, 2006) in the centre. We have also shown that many students connect strongly to the educational setting and its study forms and perform well.

However, as the results of the second research question show, some students do not participate in accordance with the institutionalized procedures. This is exemplified by addressing a group of newly arrived immigrants whose families are outside Sweden. Although these students express and show commitment to their studies, their life situations affect their ability to pursue studies and achieve success.

Using the analytical concepts, we have identified a critical lack of organizing knots that support them and other students who have similar difficulties in their lives and find it hard to connect with their studies. The teachers have to spend a lot of time providing these students with general counseling and support for the problems they face outside school. We have shown how the individual disadvantaged young student and his/her teachers are left to handle these issues by themselves. Our identification of a lack of organizing knots is consistent with the conclusions of Bunar (2010), who points out the lack of organizational strategies and institutional co-operation for youths who are new to the country.

The students we examined represent a group that is expected to increase in the coming years (Migrationsverket 2014). The exemption of

adult education from the obligation to provide structures that provide professional and psychological support, health care and special needs (SFS 2010:800, Ch. 2, §25) is distinctly problematic in terms of this group's needs.

Conclusions

This in-depth empirical study on the local organizing of individualized and flexible learning in Swedish basic adult education provides severe results on the 'reinforced individualized perspective' in national policies of adult education. The results and analysis are aligned with studies of compulsory school and upper secondary school system in the Nordic countries (Carlgren et al 2006), on how the policy of individualization is based on neo-liberal ideas of individuals as responsible for themselves and their own learning. However, a specific critical incongruity is revealed: the current 'reinforced individualized perspective' in Swedish adult education neglects complex contexts and the life situations of many individuals. This specific "individualized perspective" actually ignores educational problems which require professional special needs counselling and psychological educational support. As the studies show, teacher care and support is not enough for supporting disadvantaged students' connection to their studies and promoting their educational results.

To conclude, it is clear that professional and psychological support for individuals with special needs is just as important to enable adult learners to achieve educational success as it is for children and adolescents. We have shown that even within an educational setting that is successful in organizing individualization and flexibility, and which is valued highly by the students, there are appreciable difficulties. Our case is based on young adults without families and with complicated life situations in a foreign country but these students are most likely not the only adults in need of support in their studies.

Given the previous lack of empirical studies on the organizing and practice of individualized and flexible learning in basic adult education, the results of this examination show the need for such critical studies with in-depth perspectives, which also focus on the context of individuals.

The analytical concepts that we have used, which provide the results of an action net with tight organizing knots, and a lack of organizing knots regarding student support, has provided results for further investigation. We see a dire need for deepening critical studies. Given the fact that the figures show that 91% of the students in basic adult education were born abroad and given the increasing refugeeism due to global conflict, it is most remarkable that education policy ignores the context of many individuals in basic adult education.

Acknowledgements

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