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## Development and Change in Municipal Adult Education

### Life History Studies and Narrative Analysis of Teacher Trajectories

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Keywords: Municipal adult education, development, restructuring, life history, teachers, narrative analysis, trajectory, plot, project

**Abstract:** In this dissertation the development and change of Municipal Adult Education (MAE) has been investigated through occupational life history studies of four teachers who have worked in MAE since the mid 1970s. The point of departure for this choice of methodology is that context is always lived and that studies of individuals' narratives of occupational life and practice will provide unique opportunities for analysing development and change in context. The four teacher trajectories have been organised into four storied narratives containing genealogies of context for narrative analysis. Structuring tools for configuring the narratives in this way have been brought in from time-space geography and comprehensive, comparative and thematic analyses of the teacher trajectories have then been carried out. Three periods of development in MAE have been identified in terms of its relationship to the State.

Five main conclusions have been drawn from the overall analysis. Firstly, how development and change are initiated by conditions not directly coupled to a reform or a restructuring programme. Secondly, that although reforms and restructuring are of importance for developments in practice in the MAE field; preconditions for development are "travelling ideas", mimetic processes and the setting up of new (local) projects. This implies a critique against more traditional implementation studies. Thirdly, the role of stabilizing processes and activities in development and change is emphasized, the plots in the narrative analysis of the teacher trajectories are much about ways in which projects take shape gradually – and also how projects destabilize through restructuring. Fourthly, what I conceptualize as "a clash of incentives" is pointed out, as two consecutive restructuring shifts in the 1990s operate simultaneously. My material shows here how quasi-market models are strong instruments of change and how goal-steering, local curriculum development, teacher collaboration and local development

projects can be de-stabilized by market technologies. Fifthly, I put forward the importance of a complex conceptualisation of professionalism – the trajectories of the teachers demonstrate how professionalism rests on many premises.

### Summary

Sweden has a tradition of adult education dating back to the popular movements at the end of the 19th century. Municipal adult education (MAE) has been a part of the public sector, offering elementary and secondary education for adults since 1968. It was launched by the 1967 Adult Education Reform after adult education had become a crucial and central issue in Swedish educational policy and labour market policy in the 1960s, when the parallel school system was abandoned and a nine-year compulsory school was introduced, as well as modernized secondary education.

Initially, MAE (municipal adult education) was to a great extent the means of providing a 'second chance' for the 'educational reserve' that had previously been denied the opportunity of secondary education. Four goals for MAE were gradually formulated and reinforced between 1967 and 1975 in a series of government bills: 1) equality, 2) democracy, 3) economic growth and 4) the satisfaction of individual preferences. These goals have applied as general goals over time, but the emphasis has differed (cf. Lundahl 1997, Lumsden Wass 2004).

Although the goals of MAE have been the same over the years, disparate ideas, concepts and techniques concerning how the MAE-state relationship should be structured, administered and organized have been brought up. From the early 1980s, as in all other organizational fields in the public sector, different forms of decentralization models and restructuring concepts have dominated. MAE can be said to have been a landing site for 'travelling' New Public Management (Hood 1991) ideas and models. However, MAE is not only a site of reform and restructuring – it is a field of adult educational practice, of learning, of teaching, and of developmental work by teachers.

### Purpose and methodology

This study is part of a research project "Transforming incentives in Swedish Adult Education", funded by the Educational Sciences Section of the Swedish Research Council. The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the development of and changes in MAE,

from the mid-1970s until the 21st century. It is based on occupational life history studies with four teachers who have worked in MAE – in different municipalities – since the early 1970s.

The reason I have chosen this approach to describe and analyze the development of and changes in MAE is that (although there has been much research on specific issues in MAE) there are no other studies that have investigated change and development over time with teachers' narratives as the point of departure. Nor are there any explorations of the trajectory of the field over time. The source of my inspiration can be found in life history research. As put by Ivor Goodson & Pat Sikes: "Given that teachers play the key role in interpreting, mediating and realizing what goes on in educational institutions, their values, motivations and understandings have considerable influence on professional practices of all kinds. Life history methodology, uniquely perhaps, enables the exploration, the tracing and tracking of this influence through the way in which it attempts to take an holistic approach to individuals in the various contexts (for example social, political, economic, religious, geographical, temporal) they inhabit." (Goodson & Sikes 2001, s. 57).

My research has resulted in four "genealogies of context" (Goodson 1992) based the interviews with the four teachers as well as historical documents. I have configured the material and worked with "narrative analyses" as described by Polkinghorne and the result is my production of four "storied narratives" (Polkinghorne 1995). The procedure has been collaborative and has included informed consent. The teachers have read and commented on abstracts, have provided further information, and I have carried out complementary interviews after having gathered additional texts, documents, etc. As a part of the collaborative nature of the research design, I have explained the conceptual framework and tools used for configuration, and we have had several discussions on analysis. The collaboration with each teacher lasted approximately half a year, the last ended in January, 2005.

### Conceptual framework for narrative analyses

In order to perform narrative analyses on people in context – on teachers in Swedish MAE over a period of some 30 years – I have worked with concepts from time-geography, an approach originally suggested by Torsten Hägerstrand (1970). Central in this perspective is that space and time are an inseparable unit: *space-time*. Everything individuals (or other entities) do takes time and occurs somewhere –

space-time provides the resources and the constraints. Hägerstrand defines three types of *constraints*: capacity constraints, coupling constraints and institutional constraints. An individual's movements/activities in space-time makes a *path*, a space-time path (also called a *trajectory*), which can be studied, related to e.g. constraints, and analyzed. A path (or trajectory) also makes it possible to study "the continuity of succession of situations" (Hägerstrand 1982, p. 323) – *situation* is another core concept of the perspective. Finally, two concepts from time-geography that I work with are *project* and *diorama*. The concept of project consists of the individual's intentions, of space-time possibilities and the "storehouse of culture", as put by Hägerstrand (p. 325). The concept of diorama is used to relate the individual to other entities – the "thereness aspect" of the concepts is what is essential.

I found the time-geographical concepts to be fruitful when organizing plots of teachers over time in MAE – my research interest being development and change in MAE. The concepts have been tools for understanding the trajectories – to conceptualize how the trajectories have been formed. Thus, the narratives concern teacher trajectories in space-time, Swedish MAE from the 1970s until a couple of years into the 21st century.

### The trajectories of the teachers

The teachers have worked with MAE since the mid-1970s with the exception of Maria, who began in 1981. They have taught different subjects: Gustav has worked with maths and physics, Anna with English and history, Britta with Swedish, history, social studies and (mainly) Swedish as a second language. Maria began teaching subjects equivalent to grades 4/5 – 9, but has been involved solely with literacy projects since 1994.

All the teachers express the enthusiasm they felt when they began working with MAE. The field was expanding and developing and they were involved. The teachers' narratives reveal how they were in agreement with the idea of a second chance, with the national project of providing adult education, with teaching and working with adults.

All the stories include certain reforms and incentives for change: the curriculum for adult education established in 1982, the restructuring of the Swedish school system in 1990/1991 in which professional freedom and local responsibility was to substitute steering by regulations, and the five-year national adult education

project the Adult Education Initiative (AEI, in Swedish Kunskapslyftet) 1997-2002, one of the aims of which was to transform MAE in order to match ideas about lifelong and flexible learning. It is evident that these reforms and incentives constitute contents of the stories: they are part of my sphere of interest in this study of development and change in MAE. More precisely, my approach using occupational life history studies, together with case studies, is a deliberate choice in order to investigate their content in specific contexts.

### Gustav's trajectory

Gustav's first MAE diorama is in a centrally located building in one of Sweden's larger cities. He gets introduced to the job and the field by his colleagues and head teachers. He attaches great importance to the school and "climate" there. MAE was important in the city, and the school had a strong identity. Gustav describes the early years as intensive. He talks about the spirit of the time: "I happened to begin when there was this spirit of the time, when [MAE] was being built up and expanding". Connected to this spirit of the time was Olof Palme, the minister of education at the time. Gustav talks about the high level of ambition of the teachers at the school where he taught, and he remembers how challenged he was and how he sat at home in the kitchen during late evenings, preparing his math examples and different explanations.

In Gustav's trajectory, projects are closely connected to his subjects. Over the years, he works with developing educational packages, is involved in discussions on course content, test construction and forms of assessment. In the 1980s, commissioned education for companies and public organizations becomes a large part of his job. In the 1990s, he gets involved in other types of projects: with a national group working with standardized course tests, with an ICT project, and with designing and distributing distance education on the Internet. His story of the early 1990s is also about study trips he made to other countries.

After the AEI, the situation changes in the municipality: in 1999 an adult education board – a meso arena of structuring and ordering adult education – is established and Gustav's MAE unit becomes one of many "providers". The MAE units in his city are first downsized and in 2001/2002 turned into a freestanding company owned by the city council. Flexible learning and flexible courses become a norm and Gustav reflects critically on these kinds of study forms.

Gustav's trajectory is the most dramatic of the four in my study. In

2002, the municipal company lost its mandate in the tendering processes. Gustav and some 300 staff were transferred to a 'holding project' where the purpose was to find new jobs in the municipality. Today Gustav is a teacher at a comprehensive school.

#### Anna's trajectory

The storied narrative of Anna's early years at MAE is about how stimulating she thought it was teaching adults English and history and about her work methods, but also about MAE being housed in the building of a upper secondary school, with no special space for the students and no workroom for the teachers. These coupling and institutional constraints are prominent.

In the 1980s, her working methods gradually change towards more individualisation and project work. The explanation she gives to this development is the 1982 curriculum for adult education and the influx of different groups of students with different needs and desires. A new headmaster becomes an important person for the development of MAE in the municipality – he has political connections and visions, manages to create space for MAE and works up an identity for it. In Anna's narrative, the development in the 1980s turns into an "exposition" in the 1990s when MAE gets a structure of its own. The staff can arrange better schedules for the students and the teachers get a workroom where they can place their materials and can plan together and produce things together.

At the end of the 1980s, Anna and her colleagues begin working with more elaborated forms of individualization methods and some of years later they move to a special building, which also houses a EU project on Open Learning. The teachers work collaboratively and, in Anna's words, they were 'ahead of the new curriculum' (introduced in 1994). Staff from other municipalities pay educational visits. Anna also works on changing working methods in her history classes during these years, but this is a more problematic. Her way of doing things differently goes via studying the history of ideas at University – i.e. primarily via content and not via form.

Also in Anna's municipality, MAE becomes one of several providers during the AEI, with 30% of the 'market'. Similar to Gustav's case, a pedagogical concept based on flexibility is prescribed; here without a time schedule for different subjects and without fixed terms, and also strongly favoured by the school leaders. The plot developed into an organizational drama in 2001, when the Labour Inspectorate came to the school to make an inspection. The

school leadership was ordered to take four measures, the most important of which, Anna emphasizes, was that the school leaders must investigate organizational factors concerning burden of work, in order to prevent ill-health, and to take measures to rectify the situation. After the inspection, the municipality came up with an action plan, and for a year all the staff met in groups with a professional counsellor in order to establish a new organisation. Slowly, things turned around and by the time of my study in 2003, there are once again work schedules and organised courses at the MAE.

#### Maria's trajectory

Maria began working in MAE in 1981, teaching basic adult education, i.e. subjects equivalent to grades 4/5 – 9. The initial part of her story is – as in Anna's story – a diorama with constraints: adult education in a remote corner of the compulsory school building. However, it is expanding: when she begins working in 1982, there are two teachers in basic adult education, at the beginning of the 1990s there are eight. The development of Maria's organization is, like Anna's, connected to a school leader with political knowledge. In the early 1990s, MAE has premises of its own, located in a central building and with "an identity" and "high status".

Maria's trajectory is explorative. She attends in-service training from the outset and after having worked a year or two she and one of her colleagues become involved in a project initiated by the county education department intended to implement the MAE Curriculum 1982. A recurrent theme in the plot of Maria's trajectory is trying out different methods and pedagogical concepts. She began to work more and more with students in need of literacy training and since 1994 has only worked in this field. Maria's trajectory becomes both a reflective and a pragmatic path towards a practice that works well for this target group. She tries out and rejects different ideas and finally finds a theory that she agrees with. In time, a matching methodology and model is developed, with strict routines and tools for adults with reading and writing difficulties.

The trajectory of the literacy activity that Maria is responsible for is dynamic and stable, but the rest of the organization goes through major changes. In the early 1990s up until the AEI, a development takes place that is revolutionary in Maria's words. But with the AEI, a major restructuring takes place. This results in multiple providers and repeated cuts in Maria's organization. Her story of the recent years is

one of economic imbalances and MAE administrators being replaced. Rather than the aimed for and commonly spoken on flexibility, there is turbulence and uncertainty.

#### Britta's trajectory

Britta's trajectory is special because it extends from being an adult education student at Hermods correspondence institute in the 1950s and 1960s to being an adult education teacher at a folk high school, to being a teacher at MAE from 1976. A recurrent theme in her story about practice is connecting to adults' experience and cultural and historical background. Her appreciation of MAE structure is also frequently emphasized, and through the years she is involved in various projects organizing adult learning activities and environments – e.g. a library at the school. From the mid-1980s, Britta becomes increasingly involved in working with students who study Swedish as a second language. In the 1990s, she and her colleagues develop interdisciplinary models, in order to provide a coherent structure for these students.

Like Maria, Britta works with the implementation of the 1982 MAE Curriculum on behalf of the county education department. Britta attaches great importance to this curriculum and the work that the school was doing at that time. When she explains developmental projects carried out much later on, she refers to the tradition they have had at the school since the days of working with the curriculum of 1982. She also attaches importance to the building which they moved in to in 1984, and where they have been since then. With a centre for MAE, a community for students and teachers is established.

In contrast to the others, there is a continuity 'in the successions of situations' in Britta's trajectory, over the decades and through reforms. Other providers were only given 20% of the market after the introduction of the AEI. In Britta's story, the municipal politicians from several parties have guarded MAE – they have had occasional contact with different teachers at MAE, have paid visits to the organisation and she thinks they have been of the opinion that it works well. This implies that the teachers have been able to complete projects, e.g. EU projects that Britta has been involved in. The collaboration with Britta takes place a year before she retires. When asked what her reflections are concerning the development of adult education, Britta points out that "the wheels turn". Individualism, flexibility, distance learning and student responsibility were what

characterised Hermods correspondence institute where she once studied as a young adult. A point she wants to make is that MAE and its structure with teachers, classes and groups was originally established because many adults did not complete their studies at Hermods or via other flexible arrangements.

#### Comprehensive analysis

In my analysis, I have distinguished between three eras in the development of MAE. My categorization of "eras" is grounded in the disparate ideas/concepts/techniques based on how the education-state relationship should be structured/organized and the implication these ideas/concepts/techniques have had for the trajectories. The eras are as follows: up to 1990/1991, 1991 to 1997 and 1997 and onwards. Briefly, one can speak about two restructuring shifts: (1) from centralization to decentralization in the early 1990s, and (2) the establishment of quasi-marketization of adult education with the AEI 1997 project onwards.

I have designed and organized my comprehensive analysis in two chapters: in the first, the field of MAE and the development of the field are the unit of analysis, in the second the development of the occupation is the unit of analysis.

#### The field and the development of the field

In this analysis, I have used DiMaggio & Powell's discussion on institutional isomorphism (1991) to analyze how the different MAE organizations, which the four teachers work in, develop in similar or homogenous ways. DiMaggio & Powell identify three mechanisms through which isomorphic change occurs: "(1) coercive isomorphism that stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy; (2) mimetic isomorphism resulting from standard responses to uncertainty; and (3) normative isomorphism, associated with professionalization." (ibid, p. 67). From my material, I find that the teachers and their organizations very much accept the central government model, and the mechanisms of coercive institutionalism are very strong until the implementation of the MAE curriculum reform in 1982.

With the introduction of the curriculum for adult education in 1982, decentralization enters the stories. In this curriculum, local planning and shaping is emphasized. One example is that the syllabus for every course is constructed so that 1/3 of the course is defined as 'deeper studies', aimed at enabling students and teachers

together to negotiate/agree on and define both the subject matter/content and the methods. When the curriculum reform of 1982 was to be implemented, with its 'andragogical mode' of structuring every syllabus with 1/3 left for the teachers and students to agree on together, the county education boards arranged for in-service training. The way in which this in-service training was arranged was via teachers and headmasters in the field. The strategy was to set up what can be regarded as network-like arrangements where teachers would discuss adult learning and inspire each other. The stories of Britta and Maria give account of this process, as they are both involved in these arrangements. Here, we see how the early efforts at decentralization during Era 1 result in uncertainty (1/3 of the syllabus – how is that supposed to be done?) and how that uncertainty encourages mimetic isomorphism.

Some reflections can also be made on normative isomorphism during Era 1. None of the teachers had come across any adult education issues during their teacher education. At the time, teacher education was oriented towards subjects, method and levels, and despite the policy of building MAE, there were no courses that focused on adult education or adult learning. Thus, when the teachers in my studies (and most of their colleagues) begin working with adult education, none of them except Britta had any professional knowledge or experience of working with adults. This means that how to teach and work specifically with adults was something that was learnt in adult-educational practice.

However, in my material, the way in which the teachers refer to a magazine that was issued in the mid-1970s indicates the presence of normative pressures. This magazine was published by an interest group in MAE, and in the editorial office there were representatives from both the field and a department at a University. Through this magazine (KOM) questions and matters involving adult education, such as good or best practices, are spread to the organizations. In-service training, courses and experience-sharing seminars were also arranged for teachers and other staff in the field, and two of the four teachers talk about such courses.

A third aspect involving normative pressures can also be found in the stories from Era 1 concerning a recurrent theme about a specific strong-willed director of studies. In three of the four stories, this is a character who manages to give MAE 'an identity', and the character is also closely connected to the fact that the organization gets a building of its own. The teachers' stories describe this man not

necessarily as a beloved boss, but more as someone who knows a lot about MAE and knows how to argue with local politicians.

To sum up, my analysis leads me to the conclusion that although Era 1 can be regarded as an era of centralisation and of government control, the main trend during the era with the governmental decentralization efforts is actually towards 'looser coupling' to central state bureaucracy. However, the field stabilizes during the decentralization efforts and the way in which it stabilizes is via mimetic isomorphism rather than coercive isomorphism. When the Swedish school system is restructured in 1990 and coercive isomorphism is defused by the government, the other isomorphic mechanisms are already in place.

There are a number of parallel processes and projects going on in the early 1990s. There is the story of the path to a MAE structure, and stories of how projects started when the teachers, students and staff were gathered in the same building. Packages of various kinds for various target groups, multiple efforts to arrange and rearrange and integrate groups, courses, collaboration with e.g. the library, with 'Open learning', etc. "Travelling" (cf. Czarniawska & Joerges 1996) pedagogical ideas such as Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, learner autonomy etc. circulate, are adopted for a while in one way or another, or set their mark in practice more permanently in some way or another. The dominating gestalt of Era 2 is new or ongoing projects.

Although MAE was intended to be part of the regular allocation of public money to the municipalities after the restructuring in 1991, it is evident from the stories that commissioned education for companies and public organizations was also a regular feature, and in 1993, earmarked funds were granted to MAE for educating the unemployed. Instead of 'bad times with cuts', conditions during the first half of the decade were fairly prosperous. All the teachers talk about conferences they participated in during this period, study trips to other countries. They call these years "the golden years" (and other similar expressions). Others come on field visits to their organization, to see how they organize and provide for AE. These mimetic features increase after the new 1994 curriculum. The difference from the reform in the 1980s is that during the implementation of the 1994 curriculum, there is no county education department. The initiative to model organization/AE practice by looking at others and imitating is solely an initiative that comes from within the organization.

Mimetic isomorphism during these years of 'the withdrawal of the coercive central state' is strong and there is also a development towards normative isomorphism. In the new 1994 curriculum and in the so-called school development agreement in 1995, the idea of professionalism was heavily emphasized. The rhetoric pointed towards 'extended' responsibilities, 'extended' professionalism and greater autonomy for the local schools, and the professional teacher is described as the key to 'school improvement', working in teacher teams, in collaboration with others (Carlgrén 2000, Sundkvist 2000). The accounts of the 1990s up to 1997 show how involved they all were, collaborating with others, developing and improving projects and education models. They were all involved with colleagues in finding ways to improve practices they wanted to improve and when they describe their work at that time, they talk about school development.

The five-year Adult Education Initiative (1997-2002) is the point when a change takes place in three of the four trajectories, but not Britta's. The restructuring of MAE resulted in the establishment of quasi-marketization, municipal order boards, purchasing processes and the entry of a variety of AE providers brings about a radically different institutional environment for the organizations the trajectories are connected to.

In all the organizations except Britta's, the teaching staff is reduced through the years and MAE is repeatedly re-structured. From the order boards and other actors in the institutional environment there is also pressure to deliver flexible and individualized MAE of a different kind than previously. With the concepts of institutional isomorphism, this restructuring shift with the pressure to deliver a certain kind of MAE can be termed as a shift towards neo-coercive isomorphism. In the era of 'flexibility' this is paradoxically about providing and delivering a certain kind of model, and this attachment to one kind of form can be termed "neo-formalism".

The neo-coercive mechanisms of Era 3 and this way of restructuring clash with the predominant mimetic and normative mechanisms embedded in the restructuring shift that took place the early 1990s with the withdrawal of the central state and the idea of defusing coercive pressures. This clash is evident in several situations in the trajectories and I conceptualize it as a "clash of incentives".

### The teaching occupation in MAE and its development

The second chapter relating to comprehensive analysis relates to the first, but the focus is shifted somewhat onto the teaching occupation in MAE and its relation to the state in terms of a welfare state profession and its development and change. Initially I bring forth how teachers in MAE, compared to other teachers in the public sector, are more dependent on state education projects, temporary priorities and educational labour market measures. Both the way in which this specific group of teachers are continuously forced to adjust to state priorities and the fact that there is no teacher education for adult education provides a basis for judging the status of the group as more dependent and thus also less professional than teachers in the compulsory school system. However, teachers in MAE often have high academic degrees in the subjects they teach and a standing as a socially sanctioned expertise by their grading authority. Features such as commissioned education also give a different, more loosely coupled, connection to the state. The trajectories of the teachers include periods in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the MAE organisations made a profit and teachers could attend courses and travel to other countries on study visits.

What feels most striking about the teachers' narratives is the broad agreement expressed with regard to the policy ideas for municipal adult education that were articulated during the years of central bureaucracy. The school system was restructured in 1990 through normative mechanisms for isomorphism that were supported by the state and new incentives in terms of goal steering and talk of teacher professionalism were introduced. In my analysis of the development of the occupation this is given importance, but I also emphasize how knowledge and the development of practice has to do with other stabilizing processes such as an established infrastructure for MAE, rooms to collaborate in, projects that take permanent form, etc.

Relating to the discussion on de-professionalization in teaching and the development of the AEI, I argue that the trajectory of the occupation tends toward more de-professionalization at this point. The quasi-market structure implies a situation that in a sense disempowers teachers as others begin to others define the profession for them. On the other hand, some examples in my material suggest teacher resistance and contestation. Thus, conceptualising the trajectory of the occupation/profession in terms of de-professionalization is problematic and I also argue that

professionalism is related to normative value systems.

### Concluding remarks

I bring forth five concluding remarks. First I point out how development and change is initiated by conditions not directly coupled to a reform or a restructuring programme. The consequences of organising all MAE in the same school building is one example. Secondly I state that reforms and restructuring are of importance for developments in practice, but the life history studies I have conducted also show that the field develops through "travelling ideas", mimetic processes, the setting up of new (local) projects and so on. This implies a critique against more traditional implementation studies. Thirdly, the role of stabilizing processes and activities in development and change is emphasized – the plots in the narrative analysis of the teacher trajectories are much about ways in which projects take shape gradually – and also how projects destabilize through restructuring. Fourthly, the clash of incentives with the AEI and quasi-market models is pointed out and I stress how my material shows how powerful this model is. Fifthly, I put forward the importance of a complex conceptualisation of professionalism: the trajectories of the teachers in my study demonstrate how professionalism rests on many premises.

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