

Institutionen för pedagogik och specialpedagogik

Individualising processes in adult education: The case of Swedish for immigrants (SFI)

av

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Abstract

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Adapting education to individual students is a prominent demand in the context of Swedish for immigrants (SFI). Teachers, schools, and municipal authorities are expected to establish educational frameworks corresponding to the needs of rather diverse student groups. However, such initiatives – defined here as individualising processes – are difficult to implement due to the active engagement in SFI of other societal actors related to labour market and integration policy. Establishing common grounds to address individual students' needs is a challenge for all involved actors, because of their often conflicting agendas. Nevertheless, previous research in the area remains limited and focuses mostly on interactions between teachers and students, without problematising other actors' active involvement.

The present thesis examines how individualising processes emerge and unfold in policy and practice of SFI. Cultural-historical activity theory is employed to trace individualising processes in interactions and negotiations between actors responsible for adapting education to individual students' needs. The thesis comprises three studies, addressing individualising processes i) in their historical emergence, informed by previous research, ii) within municipal authorities' organisational frameworks and measures, and iii) through SFI teachers' collective efforts to overcome emerging challenges. Empirical data consist of public policy texts and semi-structured qualitative interviews with seven municipal officers and 18 SFI teachers from various Swedish municipalities.

The findings suggest that the emergence of individualising processes in the context of SFI is the result of historically shifting societal challenges reflected in the involved actors' current practices. In trying to adapt education to individual students' needs, municipal authorities are simultaneously engaged in the making of broader objectives, such as in increasing control over – and efficiency within – adult education, or in sustaining social cohesion. The findings also show that efforts to adapt education to individual students' needs elicit tensions, the handling of which leads SFI teachers to either retain their roles as adult educators or to expand their practices over institutional boundaries. By synthesising findings from the three studies, the thesis problematises individualising processes beyond the teacher-student interactions and offers new insights on how efforts to adapt education to individual students' needs have the potential to challenge established practices and offer possibilities for the emergence of creative solutions.