Abstract to be submitted to Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development

Title

Organisation of adult education for immigrants in rural areas – support for career development?

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Abstract

This paper reports on an ongoing ethnographically informed project focusing how career development for immigrants in three rural areas is organised through local institutions in Sweden. With the theoretical concepts of within, between and beyond we are analysing how local educational institutions and employment offices organise can be understood to support career development (or not). Our preliminary analysis shows that the size of the rural area seems to matter in terms of how flexible the local institutions are and in what kind of support they can give the students. The smaller communities also seem to try to be more collaborative with areas of the same size and more active in order to draw benefits from organisations that are funded to support rural areas.

Keywords: Rural education, immigrants, social justice, career development

Relation to the conference theme

The project presented here involves questions of how local institutions in rural areas supports career development of adult immigrants. Thus several themes of the conference is touched upon, such as social justice for immigrants as well as individuals living in rural areas and their agency.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

Rural areas are sometimes described with the notion of idyll (Shucksmith, 2016). In a related vein it has been found in research that youth immigrants sometimes describes rural areas as having fewer stigmatised areas, rural places as places in which integration might work more smoothly through education and work due to its smallness and thus giving space for spontaneous interactions (Rosvall, 2017), however little is known if that also counts for adults. In addition there are an imbalance between rural and urban research (Beach, Johansson, Öhrn, Rönnlund, & Rosvall, 2019) in favour for research in urban areas. Although there are many investigations about immigrants and their social involvement and marginalization in education and wider society, research on immigrants in rural areas is scarce and it tends to be conducted from rather urban-centred perspectives and theories. With that background this paper reports on ethnographically inspired project in which career development of adult immigrants and refugees is investigated in three rural areas. To understand immigrant individuals’ agency in career development through local educational institutions, it is important to understand the local context and place (cf. Massey, 1994). Thus, we use Ainscow et al’s (2012) concept of ecology of equity as a tool to investigate power relations with regard to place and agency of adult immigrant students. It means exploration of the demographics of the areas served by schools and the histories, cultures and economic realities faced by immigrant and refugee
populations. To support the analysis Ainscow et al’s (2012) theory offers the analytical concepts within, between and beyond. Even though such separation is only possible analytically it allows us to deepen understandings of different levels of educational policy and practice through cross cultural analysis of the three researched rural areas. They describe within schools as “the ways, in which students are taught and engaged with learning; the ways in which teaching groups are organised and the different kinds of opportunities that result from this organisation; the kinds of social relations and personal support that are characteristic of the school; the ways in which the school responds to diversity in terms of attainment, ethnicity and social background” (Ainscow et al., 2012, p. 2).

Between schools is described as competition and collaborations between schools, which might be especially interesting in this case since the three rural areas are interacting through educational cooperation’s constituted in order to support rural areas. The last concept forming ecology of equity, beyond schools includes the wider policy context within which schools operate; the interests and understandings of the professionals working in schools; and the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of the areas served by schools. Beyond this, it includes the underlying social and economic processes at national and – in many respects – at global levels out of which local conditions arise (Ainscow et al., 2012 p. 3).

Thus, in this paper we are analysing organisation and practice of adult education for immigrants and refugees as preparation for career development in three rural areas in Sweden.

The research questions helping to focus the aim are formulated as follows:

- How can the organisation of students in and within different local institutions be understood in relation to their opportunities to career development?
- How does or do not different institutions within and between local areas cooperate in order to support students’ career development?
- How is the wider policy context in which those institutions operate understood by professionals in those institutions?
- How does those conditions vary among the research sites and how can this variation be understood?

**Methods/methodology**

The project reported on had an ethnographic approach in which three rural municipalities have been selected. Most rural areas in Sweden lies in the north and so do the three selected research sites. However they differ in demographic composition in terms of density, size and geographical positioning in terms of distance to larger towns and possibilities of higher education and historical base of production. They have in common that they are organised in a collaboration called “Akademi norr” (Northern academy) which was founded in order to support adult education in the northern parts of Sweden.

Ethnography focuses on the study of cultural formation and maintenance in particular places through multiple methods for the generation of diverse forms of data based on the direct involvement and long-term engagement of the researcher(s) as the main research instrument (Hammersley, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The intention is to provide accounts of how the everyday practices of those engaged in educational processes are implicated in broader social relations and cultural production and to highlight the agency of educational subjects in these processes. Continuous fieldwork was planned which resulted in field notes from site visits and classroom observations; interviews with institution officials, teachers, study and career counsellors and students at Swedish
language education for immigrants (SFI), Municipal adult education (KomVux), Swedish public employment service (AF). This material was produced through what Jeffrey and Troman (2004) write represents an intermittent time mode. It is meant to allow a flexible approach to the frequency of site visits and progressive focusing in relation to the participant observation and general data production. It involves the development and continual evaluation of a characteristic ethnographic spiral of research planning and reflection, data production and analysis, new planning, and further data production and analysis.

Outcomes/ expected results

The size of the place in which the local institutions operated seemed to have impact on how transitions between educational institutions became operationalised. In smaller places professionals could operate in a more flexible manner in terms of transitions and also for example how to with short notice develop courses in order to support immigrants students. Such support could be aimed at career development in terms of shorten educational attainment in progress for employment, broaden competences, supporting language development within a specific field (for example Swedish concepts within business economics). However, such support was also used in order to attain economic assistance from the state to the educational institution or the individual student. Those benefits could attract the immigrant to stay in the rural area, even though in the interviews with the professionals economic benefits following the arrangements of a course was never explicitly used as an argument to make immigrants to stay in the area. The smaller communities also seem try to be more collaborative with areas of the same size and more active in order to draw benefits from organisations that are funded to support rural areas.

References