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Per Andersson

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National Policy and the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning in a Swedish Municipality

Dr. Per Andersson

Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning

Linköping University

SE-581 83 Linköping

Sweden

per.andersson@liu.se

Phone: +46 13 282115

Fax: +46 13 282145

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Abstract

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been part of adult education policy and practice for a long time, but in different ways and in different times and places. In Sweden, RPL has been an explicit part of the policy since 1996. This policy analysis starts with the current Swedish policy concerning RPL. The figures of thought expressed in official policy texts are traced in, and compared to what is expressed in, the (discursive) practice of a case of local policy and development initiatives. The objective of the analysis is to see how the policy in official texts is reproduced and transformed at the local level. The theoretical starting point is the Foucauldian concept of 'governmentality', and RPL is seen as a technique for governing adult education, the adult learner, and also adult learning. The analysis focuses particularly on the governing of adult education, expressed in the 'salvation narrative' of RPL, and in ideas of what RPL is and how it should be organised. Indirect as well as direct techniques of governing are identified in the governing of and through RPL.

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Introduction

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been part of adult education policy and practice for a long time, but in varying ways in different times and places. Various concepts are used around the world and, furthermore, the idea of recognising prior learning has been present long before a specific concept was introduced.

Although its origins are commonly traced to post-World War Two USA (Weil & McGill, 1989), when returning veterans wanted their skills recognised by universities, RPL is not a totally new phenomenon [...] Rather, it is the formalisation and (re)naming of pre-existing practices concerning alternative access and admissions, mature age entry, and so on. (Harris, 2006, p. 3)

RPL comprises varying processes of assessing, documenting and giving recognition to prior learning, irrespective of when, where and how learning has taken place. For example, informal learning is given a formal value in terms of grades or qualifications, or immigrants' foreign credentials are recognised in their new home country. This article is about RPL, or

‘validation’, in Sweden. Validation, in the meaning synonymous to recognition of prior learning, is a central part of the Swedish policy on adult learning and adult education. Validation is also a matter of new ideas when it comes to what learning and knowledge ‘counts’. The domination of formal education is challenged when validation provides new possibilities for valuing learning and knowledge from informal and non-formal learning contexts.

Even if the idea of recognising prior learning was present earlier, it was not until 1996 that the French concept validation (‘validering’ in Swedish) was introduced in Sweden. Today ‘validation’ is also used in English, particularly in the European Union context, synonymously with the concepts of recognition, accreditation or assessment of prior learning. It should be noted that validation in English often means a form of audit or appraisal of courses or programmes, but the concept is also used synonymously with recognition/accreditation of prior learning, referring to the French validation des acquis de l’expérience. It is this latter sense the term has in the context of adult learning in Sweden and in this article.

The introduction of validation in Sweden was part of the initial stage of the national Adult Education Initiative (AEI), an initiative for renewal and restructuring of adult education running between 1997 and 2002 (see e.g. Beach and Carlson, 2004; Lumsden Wass, 2004; and Beach, 2006, concerning the restructuring of Swedish adult education). During those years, there was also a specific focus on validation of ‘foreign vocational competence’. Two official reports on that particular topic were published (Ministry of Education, 1998, 2001), and pilot programmes were initiated (see e.g. Andersson *et al.*, 2004). A report from the

Ministry of Education (2003) provided the guidelines for the current development of validation in Sweden (not including its development in higher education).

This policy analysis focuses on the current Swedish policy concerning validation (RPL). The figures of thought expressed in official policy texts are traced in, and compared to what is expressed in, the (discursive) practice of a case of local policy and development initiatives in one municipality. The municipality, here named Swandleton, has been studied in a four-year research project employing ethnographic methods (see also Andersson, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). The objective of the present analysis is to see how the policy in official texts is reproduced and transformed at the local level. The analysis starts from the Foucauldian concept of 'governmentality', and validation is seen as a technique for governing adult education.

The official national policy could be seen as a technique for indirect governing, in accordance with the governmentality that, from a Foucauldian perspective, characterises the advanced liberal society. Thus, the results show how indirect governing results in both reproduction and transformation of the national policy. Some figures of thought are reproduced, some are transformed, and some are not present at the local level.

Theoretical perspective – governmentality

The present analysis takes up Foucault's concept of governmentality, in the general sense of a rationality of governing. Foucault identified different rationalities of governing, or 'governmentalities' (Foucault, 1991). The ancient centralised repressive governing through physical punishment has changed into more decentralised and indirect techniques of governing. In particular, 'governmentality' is used to describe the specific rationality of governing developing in an advanced liberal society (Dean, 1999). Governing becomes indirect, acting through a possible but invisible surveillance, illustrated by Bentham's idea of

the Panopticon, and by encouraging ‘technologies of the self’. For example, the necessity and value of learning, and making learning visible, is promoted in the lifelong learning discourse – and is thus part of the governing of the population. Here, however, ‘governmentality’ is not only defined as this indirect rationality of governing. Rather, the rationality of governing, where disciplinary power functions through more direct ‘technologies of power’, is also included in the perspective. Foucault (1977) identified surveillance, observation, and examination, as ‘technologies of power’ that are central in the concept of ‘power-knowledge’. These technologies create knowledge (about the population) that is the basis of power, and power is the basis of applying these technologies. These, in turn, function as dividing practices, including/excluding and normalizing in different ways. For example, the extensive knowledge produced through education, particularly in educational measurements such as assessments and examinations, is part of the knowledge about the population.

Nevertheless, the indirect, encouraging governing is important in an analysis of policy. As Simons (2007) discusses, building on Mathiesen (1997), it is not only the model of Panopticon that illustrates the encouragement, but also the model of ‘synopticon’. That is, it is not mainly the possibility that a few are observing the many (as in the Panopticon) who are thus being governed. On the contrary, for example, the ideas of ‘best practice’ and exemplary ‘good conduct’, the behaviour of stars and VIPs presented in mass media, or a central non-binding but normalizing education policy directed towards the local political level, all mean that the many in varying ways are encouraged by observing the few. It should be noted that this ‘synopticon’ has similarities to but is still different from the ancient repressive governing where the masses were observing the punishment of the few (see Simons, 2007).

An analysis of government from this perspective focuses on what the rationalities of governing are, and particularly on aspects of these rationalities such as what to govern, how to govern, and why (the teleos of government) (cf. Dean, 1999). From a Foucauldian perspective, power is relational and exists only through action. Therefore the how of governing is a central concern, analysing what is called the ‘conduct of conduct’ through different techniques or tactics. ‘Conduct’ here refers to the double meaning of the verb – both to lead or guide others and to behave oneself.

As will be shown, validation is a matter of governing both through surveillance – examination and measurement – and through encouragement. Validation per se is a technique of governing where knowledge and competence are examined, measured. At the same time, the figure of thought (Asplund, 1979), or ‘idea’, of validation fabricates the desirable adult learner who is constantly learning. A ‘figure of thought’ is an idea that is part of, or present ‘under’, a discourse. The existence of validation encourages learning, and it furthermore encourages the subject to be examined and measured. Moreover, the idea of validation and a non-binding central policy supports the fabrication of new ways of constructing/organising adult education in the municipality, which is the main focus of this article. According to the governing and normalizing ideas of validation, adult education ‘should’ be organised in a way that makes prior learning visible – as a gain for society and for the individual in terms of economy, learning and self-esteem.

There is growing interest in applying Foucauldian approaches in a number of areas, e.g. in research on adult/lifelong learning (see Fejes and Nicoll, 2008) and on education policy. For a brief overview of research concerning education and assessments from a Foucauldian perspective, see Andersson and Fejes (2005), and for an overview of different, more or less

pure or eclectic, ways of using Foucault in the area of lifelong learning, see Fejes (forthcoming). This study of governmentality in the context of education policy, is one of a number of recent accounts (e.g. Edwards, 2002; Ball, 2003; Olssen, 2003; Tickly, 2003; Olssen *et al.*, 2004; Andersson and Fejes, 2005; Fejes, 2006; Pykett, 2007; Simons, 2007; and a number of examples in Fejes and Nicoll, 2008).

Research on validation

The development of validation of vocational competence in Sweden has been described by Andersson *et al.* (2004), and validation as a technique of fabricating the adult learner in Swedish adult education policy has been analysed by Andersson and Fejes (2005). Generally, the idea of validation is under-theorised in current educational research, but attempts are being made to re-theorise it. A current example presents perspectives from assessment theory; the sociology of education; poststructuralism and situated knowledge/learning theory; activity, actor-network and complexity theory; and symbolic interactionism (Andersson and Harris, 2006).

There does not seem to be much research on validation from a Foucauldian perspective, except for a few prior analyses carried out in Sweden. Validation is identified as one of the techniques promoted in the adult education discourse in order to govern the adult learner. Validation acts, together with other techniques, in the fabrication of the adult learner. Varying ideas of validation fabricate somewhat different learners/subjects, but a common factor in this figure of thought is some sort of examination, assessment or measurement of the subject. When prior learning is validated, new knowledge about the subject and about the population is created, knowledge that in different ways could be the basis of governing, for example, in the organization of flexible learning opportunities (Andersson and Fejes, 2005). This could be compared to how the adult learner, or the 'educable adult', in general is created in Swedish

policy. Fejes (2006) shows how the adult learner today is governed not mainly through institutions based on expert knowledge, as before, but through his or her own choices and actions. Thus the idea of validation partially differs from general governing by means of the subject's own choices and actions as it also includes a central dimension of knowledge creation related to governing by means of expert knowledge.

Nevertheless, governing via the adult's choices and actions is particularly relevant when it comes to the governing of learning. Andersson and Fejes (2005) further show how validation governs and fabricates not only the adult learner but also adult learning. Validation methods, like other educational assessments, do not only reactively measure what has been learnt. They are also (potential) techniques for governing learning. A specific choice of validation methods, knowledge areas to be covered, etc. promotes certain ways and contents of learning, via a possible future assessment, similar to a possible, invisible surveillance – and similar to, but in a way that is different from, assessments in formal education. In this way, validation becomes a 'new' dividing practice when it comes to differences in valuing different learning and knowledge. This is particularly a matter of governing informal, and non-formal, learning. However, validation is also one of the techniques governing formal learning. It promotes flexible and individualised learning. Adult education should be a matter of new learning, not of studying things you already know (Andersson and Fejes, 2005).

One more example of a similar approach is a critical discourse analysis of the validation (accreditation) practice at an English university (Peters, 2004, 2005). It shows how the candidates have to learn the discourse to be able to fulfil the requirements, which makes accreditation a powerful means of control and exclusion rather than a process that acknowledges what is already known. Further, this is a common theme in the critical research

on validation: validation/recognition/accreditation of prior learning is presented as a technique that should facilitate the transfer of competences and qualifications between contexts like everyday life and academia, or between different countries. But in this process there is an inherent potential for not only inclusion but also exclusion of knowledge, and of (adult) learners (see e.g. Starr-Glass, 2002; Michelson, 2006).

Method

The data used in the analysis are partly official documents, partly texts produced in a qualitative study of the development of validation in the Swedish municipality Swandleton. Employing ethnographic methods (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) means that interviews have been conducted and observations made, and different documents have been collected. All this material is used in the analysis. The main official national document used in this analysis is a report from the Swedish Ministry of Education (2003) about ‘validation etc.’.

The data from Swandleton consist of notes from participant observations and informal conversations, transcribed interviews, and locally produced documents. The data have been collected over a period of four years, but the researcher’s presence in the local context of validation development varied during this period, i.e. a ‘selective intermittent time mode approach’ (Jeffrey and Troman, 2006) was applied. Observations have been made mainly in different types of meetings, in events for promoting and giving information about validation, and in pilot programmes. The interviewees are the local politician responsible for adult education, administrators, developers, adult educators and project leaders developing and providing validation, and participants in pilot programmes. Quotations (translated into English) from interview transcripts, notes and documents are used to illustrate the analysis.

This results in a policy analysis, with the Foucauldian perspective as its starting point. In the present analysis, policy text is related to local policy discourse, as expressed in texts produced in the ethnographic study of a case. One starting point for this approach is that the introduction of something new, in this case ‘validation’, creates opportunities for a discursive practice where policy is expressed and discussed, and is thus possible to study and analyse. Further, the present analysis is complementary to prior analyses of the policy on validation governing the adult learner and adult learning. Here, the focus on policy governing adult education means a focus on national policy governing the local organization, and on the local reproduction and transformation of this policy – ideas expressed in a national policy text are traced in, and compared to what is expressed in, the discursive practice of local policy and development initiatives. Thus the governing of the organization and its construction of a local policy is in the foreground, while the governing of the subject is in the background.

Developing validation in the municipality

I will first give a brief overview of the development of validation in Swandleton, as the focus concerning what to govern in the present study is the way of organising/constructing adult education at the local level. The municipality was a ‘slow starter’. That is, there was no explicit development work on validation during the AEI, and no pilot programmes focusing on foreign vocational competence. The headmistress of adult education, Annie, describes this slow start:

It’s a short story and not much of one, validation in Swandleton. [...] We probably waited for the government to tell us that these are the frames and this is an important task. [...] So validation has not been a big issue but rather a bad conscience in Swandleton, and that is something a number of us must take responsibility for. That’s the way it is. (interview, Annie, headmistress of municipal adult education)

It was not until after the AEI that validation was included in the local policy and an explicit initiative was taken. After the AEI, a national initiative was taken to establish the new 'infrastructure' of adult education, and money was earmarked for local development projects. This meant that the municipalities were governed indirectly by the normalizing statement on a new infrastructure, but there was local freedom concerning how and what infrastructure should be developed. In this municipality, the development of infrastructure was organised in the form of a number of different projects with different foci.

One part of this was a validation project, run by two local non-formal adult education providers (a folk high school and a study association) in co-operation with the municipality. This project was also broadened, as it was awarded a grant from the European Social Foundation. The project included some mapping of possibilities of validation in Swandleton, but the main focus, particularly promoted by the project leader Bill, was to develop an individualistic and general approach to validation (see Andersson, 2006b, and below). There were difficulties in recruiting participants to a pilot programme with this approach. In addition, changing and vague guidelines were issued by the steering group for the project (where the municipality was represented). This first project did not satisfy the expectations of the municipality. Jack, head of the municipal Information Centre for adult education, reflects upon the project and its approach:

... there was a lot of talk about validating the whole person in some way. And I never really understood, I must admit, what that meant. [...] But what opportunities does that give you in the next stage, when you're going to enter a labour market or begin an educational programme. [...] I think they had the wrong starting point there. [...] ... we ought to have validation where we talk about what people know and don't know in the [specific] context.

And more than that we cannot validate. Because I can't see a validation covering the whole person, as I don't really understand it. And if I don't understand it, there are surely a lot of others who don't understand. (interview, Jack, head of the Information Centre)

After a while, a second project was initiated. This time, the task was given to the Information Centre or, to be more precise, to three of its education/vocation counsellors – Andy, Barbara and Linda. The project included: the development of a model for organising validation, information, extensive contacts with adult education providers and some pilot programmes in a few competence areas such as administration and ICT competence. An official document from the municipality states:

The aim of validation is to map and document the individual's real competence, and thereby to shorten the path to the educational goal. The Information Centre has been commissioned to develop a model for how validation should be offered in the municipality and implemented systematically. The commission also includes carrying out a number of validations during the year. (Commission plan, Municipal adult education, Education office, Municipality of Swandleton)

The second project was completed and a report was submitted to the municipality. After this, it again took some time before two of the three counsellors (Andy and Barbara) from the Information Centre were able to take up the task again – part two of the second project involved further development but with more limited resources. During this process, there were no national regulations, although there were other types of governing, which will be described and analysed below.

The salvation narrative of validation

We now turn to the teleos of government when it comes to validation as a technique of governing. In the official narratives of Swedish adult education, validation is presented in a 'salvation narrative'. The main ideas expressed in this narrative are the following: Validation means economic gains both for the individual and for society. Education/training based on validation of prior learning should be shorter and cheaper. Validation is also seen as a way of making competence visible, and thus useable in the labour market. Furthermore, individual gains, such as reinforcing self-esteem are also presented in the narratives (Fejes and Andersson, 2007). In the report from the Ministry of Education (2003, p. 13), validation is particularly inscribed in a discourse of lifelong learning and economic competitiveness, where possibilities for lifelong learning are described as necessary for global economic competitiveness based on competence and quality.

In Swandleton, this salvation narrative is mainly reproduced by the politician responsible for labour market, adult education and the introduction of validation, Mr. Wall. He particularly promotes the idea of validation as a means of more effective adult education.

The aim is that everyone should gain from it [validation]. Greater self-confidence, shorter time in education, we can have more participants in education. (observation, utterance by Mr Wall, local politician)

And then it is also related to, if you look at the development of adult education as a whole, we can see that for a period of time in Swandleton at least we will have less resources for upper secondary adult education, and then this business of being able to validate knowledge will play an important role in reducing the study time. [...] for a number of reasons. Partly for the individual, partly for the municipality and its cash box so to speak, as we see that the resources for adult education are diminishing. (interview, Mr Wall, local politician)

When it comes to the relation to the labour market, the narrative is somewhat transformed or narrowed. It is not principally economic competitiveness that is in the foreground in the local governing narrative but, rather, validation as a means of raising employability and reducing unemployment.

The salvation narrative is not reproduced by administrators and developers. They have a more 'realistic' approach, where validation is seen as one tool among others; firstly, in the context of adult education, secondly, in relation to employability.

But one should not overestimate this either, one should not believe that this is the key to the solution of all problems. Because that's not the way it is. [...] Yes, a little bit like that, there is hope that we now have a tool for getting people to pass faster through the system. But I mean the time it takes to go through the system is, nevertheless, what knowledge I have. Therefore we can't ignore it. (interview, Jack, head of the Information Centre)

And further, 'what the politicians want is more adult education for the money allocated', as one administrator puts it.

Validation governing adult education

The analysis now focuses on the question of how, elaborating the ways validation acts as a technique of governing. The idea of validation is one of the ideas that have been introduced in a process of re-structuring adult education in Sweden. Lumsden Wass (2004) carried out a critical discourse analysis of the discursive construction, in official documents, of the renewal of Swedish adult education. A new structure was constructed in a discourse of governance (focusing on the 'local' as opposed to the 'central' level), a discourse of marketisation, and a

discourse of co-operation. Furthermore, the restructuring of adult education included both a discourse of individualisation and a discourse of learning. 'Flexibility' and 'validation' are two of the key words in the discourse of individualisation (Lumsden Wass, 2004). Thus, validation is present in the discursive construction. The discourse of learning (as opposed to education) also acts in accordance with the idea of recognition or validation of prior (informal and non-formal) learning – the focus of the discourse is not on formal education but (all types of) learning. In the following, we will see in greater detail how this construction of adult education is reproduced in and produced by the more specific construction of validation.

The report on validation from the Ministry of Education (2003) expresses the ambition of the government to govern adult education in a way that assigns validation a central position. One explicit purpose of the report is said to be the general governing of the local planning in the municipalities (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 15). Regions, municipalities, adult education institutions and other actors are expected to make use of validation, both as a structured process and as part of the teaching process. This is a part of the governing of more flexible and individualised forms of adult education. The arguments supporting gains for the individual and society in the 'salvation narrative' promoting validation (see above) are one dimension of this governing, but there are also the organizational dimensions of how to relate validation to adult education and to the labour market, and the dimension of distribution of the economic responsibility.

At the local level, it is evident that the idea of local governance is reflected in the development of validation. Even if the developers in Swandleton are acquainted with validation initiatives in other municipalities, it is the local model that is developed, based on the local conditions governing adult education. There is also no regional co-operation –

something that is discussed in the different projects but without resulting in any actual co-operation. The focus is on initiating activity rather than co-operation, as expressed by Andy.

The reason why we haven't co-operated with Wirdleton and the small municipalities around us is that then it would take another 2–3 years before any activity could get started. We don't want it like in Shillbridge, that one build up a giant organization, it's certainly nice to have education for both headmasters, teachers and counsellors in the whole County of Shillbridge. That's good. But the activity, those who are to be validated, our applicants, the unemployed and sick-listed and so on... what about them? Aren't they, they are our target group. [...]

Validation is not a fetish! (interview, Andy, councillor/developer)

The marketisation of adult education also has a strong position in the development of validation. This is particularly obvious in the second development project run by the Information Centre. Here, the idea was that validation would be provided by the local adult educators – i.e. those providers, which have an agreement with the municipality as part of the organization of municipal adult education. This reproduction of marketisation involves both possibilities and restrictions. Firstly, there is the economic dimension, the payment. The providers have agreements, which means that they (within a certain framework) are paid for the number of participants who take their courses. And here, 'validation' is also possible – the participants could be given their grades via validation, and not only through participation in the course. But this economic possibility is also a restriction – it means that only knowledge or competence included in the formal adult education courses (although including theoretical courses as well as vocational training) could be validated. In the first part of the second project, there was also money available for validation of other competencies, but in the second part there are no such resources. Jack, the head of the Information Centre, describes and discusses the situation:

... therefore those we co-operate with are those who provide upper secondary adult education today. [...] But if this model is to work fully, one must also consider a... yes, a vocational validation. And then maybe we must involve companies or labour market training, or our vocational upper secondary schools would surely be able to manage it too. But that is, so to speak, the next step in all this. (interview, Jack, head of the Information Centre)

A second problem of marketisation is that there were changes in the group of providers. For example, in the first part of the second project, a pilot programme with validation of ICT competence was developed by one of the providers, LearnInc. (see Andersson, 2007). However, in January the following year, LearnInc. was no longer contracted as a municipal adult education provider.

And they feel the value of being involved in developing such a model. Because it's related to the future involvement in that context. Now it turned out somewhat unfortunate! Because LearnInc. which has been an important partner in validation here has now disappeared, as their offer was a little bit too high, and then that means that... yes, it will be a little tough. (interview, Jack, head of the Information Centre)

Consequently, this development work was more or less wasted, at least from the perspective of the municipal developers. They had to start building relations with a new provider of ICT courses.

Thirdly, marketisation means that the agreements between the municipalities and the providers restrict the potential of validation. The validation developers, e.g. Andy, have no

influence on the purchasing process in which, for example, the former ICT training provider was not chosen.

Yet another obstacle, then, is this business of purchasing in the municipality, that it is very much separated from our work. We have really only talked once with the person who has worked with purchasing, but there is still a huge wall between our work and the purchasing process. (interview, Andy, counsellor/developer)

Furthermore, there are only a few lines concerning validation in the written agreements. It is stated that the providers should contribute to the development of validation, but there are neither obligations nor specific guidelines concerning the type of contribution, payment for actual validations, etc.

During the period of the agreement, the provider shall be prepared, together with the Orderer, to assist in the development of validation systems. (from written agreement between the municipality and a provider of adult education)

Thus, the flexibility and individualisation, and even ‘salvation’, expected of validation are not that easy to realise. Even if there is a salvation narrative acting at the local policy level, this policy is restricted, instead of being reproduced, by the administrative system where resources are allocated.

Validation as part of an infrastructure of lifelong, flexible learning

The concept of ‘infrastructure’ has been introduced as a way of defining the structural dimension of adult education in Sweden. Certain measures were taken to develop this infrastructure. Validation was defined as an important part of the infrastructure that makes

flexible learning possible. In the context of validation policy, there is said to be a ‘need’ for an infrastructure of adult learning, to make possible flexible learning, and this infrastructure is described as a ‘chain’ of guidance, validation, and support for flexible learning (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 14). Thus, validation is seen as part of a structured process where guidance results in validation of prior learning, which results in flexible and individualised formal learning.

Validation is not described only as a possible link in this chain, but rather as a necessary part that the municipalities should organise. It is stated that there will be a ‘problem’ both for the individual and for society if competence from outside formal education is not documented (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 18).

As mentioned, validation was introduced as an explicit part of the local adult education in the infrastructure project. Further, the idea of validation as a link in a chain is reproduced in the way the later validation project in the municipality is organised. It is the Information Centre that is responsible for developing validation, and it is also the centre that provides guidance concerning educational opportunities. The centre does not take on the task of providing validation, but acts as a ‘broker’ between adults and education, where guidance and validation are seen as two tools (validation is introduced as the second tool) – guidance provided by the centre and validation provided by education providers, and complementary education is a step that follows after validation.

The process of a validation: Step 1. You contact one of the counsellors at the Information Centre. Together with the counsellor, you make an initial assessment of whether your prior experience could satisfy the requirements of the adult education curriculum. [...] Step 2. You will meet one or more teacher(s) who teach in the area you want to validate. Step 3. Your

knowledge is tested orally and/or in writing or in practical tasks. How the validation is carried out in detail varies between different areas. [...] Step 4. If your knowledge corresponds to a whole course, you get a grade in that course. If something is missing [in relation to the course demands] supplementary education is offered. You may also get a certificate of the knowledge you already have. (printed leaflet on validation, from the Information Centre)

However, this idea of the separate (but related) link in a chain is not fully reflected either in policy or in the actual validation initiatives taken. Firstly, what is seen as the first step in a validation process (a mapping of relevant competence, mainly through self-assessment and conversation) is described by the developers in the municipality as a part of the guidance process – and even in national policy, validation is described as a ‘natural’ part of a guiding process (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 22). Secondly, the study of an initiative for validation of ICT competence (mentioned above) shows how validation and learning are integrated rather than separated in the process, which leads to the introduction of another picture – validation as an ‘intertwined strand of a rope’ (Andersson, 2007) rather than as a link in a chain, and with learning as a second strand.

The ideas of validation

A central part of the governing discussed is the normalizing way of defining what validation is. The Ministry of Education defines it as:

... a process including structured assessment, valuing, documentation and recognition of knowledge and competence that a person has, irrespective of how they have been acquired. (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 19)

In addition to this, three main areas of this practice are defined. Validation is stated to be:

- a part of an educational process, to identify the level of the individual's knowledge, to adapt the level of the education and/or make it shorter,
- a part of a guiding process defining the starting level of further education,
- a matter of documenting actual knowledge and skills before applying for a job, or in relation to learning and competence development in the workplace. (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 21–22)

The first point is described as an 'obvious part of every individualised, educational activity'. In relating teaching to the student's knowledge and experience, validation becomes part of a process where assessments of actual knowledge could benefit the student. This is referred to as an idea and an attitude that has traditionally been promoted in adult education (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 22).

We can see how the definition of validation governs the municipalities at a more general level. Validation is described in a normalizing way, not only as an 'obvious' part of education but also as a 'natural' part – an expectation that every municipality should provide validation.

Finally, validation is defined as having an exploratory (as opposed to a controlling) function (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 23). Exploring means finding out what knowledge and skills the individual has, without a prerequisite of fulfilling certain goals or criteria. However, even if the technique of recognising prior learning is exploratory, the goal should still be to document knowledge and skills in a way that is accepted in the educational system and the labour market – which might make goals and criteria necessary. Expressed in another way, there is an ambition to explore and include different types of knowledge, but the framework

of the educational system means that certain knowledge is included while other knowledge is excluded.

All this illustrates the complexity of the idea of validation, at least in the Swedish context.

Validation is not only a ‘natural’ part of education, it is also related to adult education as well as to the labour market. It could be both integrated with learning and a separate process, and there are exploratory as well as controlling functions. How is this complex idea reproduced at the local level?

The first validation project in Swandleton, and in particular the project leader Bill, promoted an idea that differs from the current official policy. As mentioned, it was the individual perspective and not education or labour market perspectives that were in the foreground in the first project. However, it should be noted that the first project, in terms of policy, partly related to what was expressed in an earlier official report from the Ministry of Education (2001), which promoted a threefold idea of competence – validation should focus on vocational, basic as well as general competence. The latter (general competence) became the focus of the project – Bill had a ‘salvation narrative’ of his own.

So the process in itself is to me almost the most important aspect of the validation process, when I get a value myself and become knowledgeable, potent, and get recognition for this. Here, I’m very interested in the general competence level that I feel is not elucidated very much, have mostly validated basic and vocational competences. And then that part pushes me more to look for, to search in the story a person has, what experiences one has had, what positions I have taken, and what they think about themselves. That’s what we’ll try to add in this project as a dimension to also show the general competence and try to find ways of making the proof visible. (interview, Bill, adult educator and project leader, first project)

In the second project, the focus was primarily on adult education, even if there were labour market ambitions in the local political policy, which included the ambition to cover all the three main areas described by the Ministry of Education (2003, pp. 21–22, see above). The educational focus and the broader ambition are described by Mr. Wall, and in a document:

It [validation] should be a natural part of adult education in Swandleton. (observation by Mr. Wall, local politician)

The Information Centre shall [...] develop forms for validation in three contexts [quoting the three main areas defined by Ministry of Education, 2003, and referred to above in this article].

(Commission and activity plan for the area Municipal adult education, the Information Centre)

The developers wanted to relate to the validation (or processes similar to validation of vocational competence) initiated by the Public Employment Office (PEO), but there were problems in relating to the PEO, and their (possible) validation was not visible in the municipal project. There were also ambitions to include and develop alternatives for marginalised groups such as unemployed immigrants and people receiving economic support from the local social welfare office, but nothing has happened so far. It should also be noted that the ‘individual’ perspective dominating the first project was not totally absent in the second project. A study association (not the same as the one running the first project) was involved in the development work, and promoted a perspective with a more individual focus than the other providers, for example, as expressed by the educator Paul:

Yes, I feel that this is raising the individuals in two ways. One is that they get papers [certificates/grades] showing that they know, which they didn’t realise before. Now they’ve also been raised from their inner misery, so to speak, in fact that they felt rather worthless as

persons. [...] I think that it raises them also so that their self-esteem is higher. (interview, Paul, adult educator providing validation in a study association)

The study association both ran one of the pilot programmes and contributed in lectures about validation for teachers and others given by the adult education providers in Swandleton.

Thus, the focus in the second project was mainly on adult education. Here, the complex idea of validation is reflected in different ways. Firstly, the approach is to develop validation as a link in a chain, but to some extent this ambition is transformed into processes that are more integrated (see above). Secondly, validation is organizationally located in the Information Centre, and is thus related to guidance and an exploratory approach. But when education providers are involved, the actual validation is more related to the controlling aspect, due to the focus on courses, grades, payment related to grading, etc. (See Andersson, 2007, for an example where control in terms of testing and grading plays a central role.)

The organization of validation

The report from the Ministry of Education (2003) does not prescribe how validation should be provided. Although two official reports had already been published and experimental projects had been organised, an expected Government bill was not introduced. Instead, the report from the Ministry of Education encouraged further local and regional development. Thus, it is a matter of governing through the text of the report without a central decision on how validation should be organised. The role of the state could be described as one of encouraging and supporting the development of validation, and the responsibility is assigned to a number of actors – state owned, municipal and private.

Nevertheless, there is an important figure of thought in play in the organization of validation in Swandleton, which should be mentioned in addition to the ‘discourses’ identified by Lumsden Wass (2004, see above). It is an idea that is limited neither to validation nor to adult education, but one that is present in all types of organization of work – the idea of the project. The Swedish Adult Education Initiative, where validation was introduced, was a giant project. Experimental projects were initiated to develop validation of vocational competence. The idea of ‘infrastructure’ was developed through municipal projects. And validation projects are also initiated in the present case. It seems that the municipality has a ‘technical’ approach to development, with a focus on initiating separate projects to develop certain areas of responsibility. In this case of validation, the project model helps us to understand the freedom of the first project, which meant that expectations were not fulfilled, and that there was a delay in the development of validation between the end of one project and the start of the next one. These problems are present even if there is an awareness of this in the organization. Barbara and Jack from the Information Centre illustrate the situation.

So then I think that the commission will be extended. Or we’ll be ordered to continue, depending on how it’s interpreted. Because this is not finished yet... We have planned to write a final report and sort of describe how we see it. And this is on the way, and now we want ... this is how it should be in the future. Partly, how it should be in the autumn, and then more regularly, how it should continue in the future. This is our intention but... yes, I guess that we will have a new commission, continue the work. (interview, Barbara, counsellor/developer)

So now when we run a project there won’t be any problems. Then we have these three, they’re working with it. But then when this project turns into more of an everyday thing, when this is supposed to be a part of the normal workload, then it could easily be that... And at the same time, we say that the knowledge and experience gained in the project should be spread to the

others on the Information Centre. And if everything is spread, there is no one who has the overriding responsibility in the everyday work. And then we all know when there's pressure from everyday work, then some things drop down on the agenda, if you have to work with... yes, solve urgent questions. That's the way it is! (interview, Jack, head of the Information Centre)

As mentioned, validation is placed in the framework of the 'infrastructure'. It is stated that this infrastructure could and should not be the same in all municipalities, but has to be adapted to local needs and conditions (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 14). However, this adaptation and development is not seen solely as the responsibility of the local municipality. On the contrary, validation should be organised in regional co-operation between educational organizations, employers (trade organizations) and trade unions (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 27). This means that validation should be the responsibility of both the educational system and working life (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 24–27.). When it comes to financing, the Ministry of Education (2003, p. 34) states that validation measures should be paid for by the respective authorities or employers responsible – depending on the purpose of the validation.

Thus, the discourse of co-operation (Lumsden Wass, 2004) is reproduced in the discourse of validation. But at the local level in Swandleton, this idea of co-operation is transformed, as the responsibility for development is assigned to specific projects and to actors mainly related to adult education in the municipality. These actors at the local Information Centre have neither the mandate nor the resources to develop any extensive co-operation with local and regional actors, at least not outside the framework of the organization of the municipality. Their first priority is also to initiate local activity (see above). Nevertheless, the policy on regional co-operation is present in their ambitions for future development, as formulated by Linda, the third of the counsellors/developers.

And if we can then co-operate... if we can solve this and find a good way of co-operating with the PEO or the Public Employment Service at the regional level. I think that could be a key to making this business of validation work in practice. (interview, Linda, counsellor/developer)

It should also be noted that the organization of validation includes a process of choosing what knowledge and competence to validate, which means including/excluding, and thus normalizing, governing what prior learning is important. However, in Swandleton this choice of certain subject areas is based on what seems to be an ad hoc process – those providers of adult education who were willing to provide validation were invited to do so, irrespective of subject area. Thus there is no clear pattern when it comes to what learning is promoted through validation.

Finally, the role of the (governing) state is defined in the report. The state should encourage and support the development of legitimacy, quality and methods of validation. More precisely, this encouragement and support should be realised by establishing a national commission on validation with a four-year mandate (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 31). Interestingly enough, this commission is located geographically close to the municipal organization analysed in the empirical case. Still, the commission is not very visible in the development work, acting indirectly even at the local level where more direct governing would be possible. The exceptions are a few meetings between developers and a representative of the commission, who was also a lecturer at some information meetings intended to develop a common perspective among teachers in adult education and counsellors at the Information Centre. In a lecture, the exploratory policy is promoted:

It should be possible to put shapeless experiences together and give them a value, rather than starting from the standard course system. [...] The demand for supplementing could lead to another type of need [of supplementary education]. [...] The need to be able to document in terms other than existing courses. (observation by a representative of the national commission on validation)

Another aspect of the role of the state is what is not present in the policy and the implementation of the policy. Even if validation has been identified as a technique that governs the adult learner partly through its contribution to the creation of knowledge about subjects (see above), this knowledge production is not used by the state to govern the municipalities. Statistics on numbers of participants and grades assigned through validation could, for example, be used to govern the local provision of validation. However, the grading in adult education, and thus the official statistics on adult education, does not provide any information about whether grades are assigned through validation or after participation in a course and its assessment procedures. Information about validation is included in, but not distinguishable from, more general information about adult education. Accordingly, official statistics about validation are neither produced nor used in the governing of validation, which leaves the indirect, encouraging governing policy as the main alternative rather than governing based on expert knowledge such as statistics.

Validation as a technique of governing

Validation in Sweden is presented in a salvation narrative promoting the economic gains for the individual and society, but also the possible strengthening of the subject's self-esteem. It is also inscribed in a discourse of lifelong learning and economic competitiveness. This narrative is partly reproduced and partly transformed in the local context. An individualistic salvation narrative is produced at an early stage in a pilot project. Later, the political level

reproduces the salvation narrative, but transforms the labour market perspective from the perspective of competitiveness into a re-active idea of defeating unemployment.

Administrators and developers, however, transform the narrative into a more 'realistic' perspective.

In the governing of adult education, the structural dimension in the discourses of local governance, marketisation and co-operation (Lumsden Wass, 2004) are reproduced in validation policy, especially when it comes to local/regional co-operation. The marketisation is not visible in any prescribed way of organising validation, as this should be developed locally, but in the economic dimension it is prescribed that different actors should pay for different validation measures. However, in the municipal case of validation, marketisation is reproduced, governing the way the idea of validation can be introduced. Further, the idea of local governance is reproduced in the development of validation, mainly in the context of adult education, rather than in ideas of local/regional co-operation. In addition to this, the idea of validation as a necessary but separate link in the chain or infrastructure of lifelong learning is partly reproduced and partly transformed into a more integrated idea. Thus, the discourses of individualisation and learning (Lumsden Wass, 2004) on the one hand promote individual informal and non-formal (and formal) learning rather than formal education, while the idea of validation, on the other hand, promotes a separate structure for formal assessment of individual (prior) learning. The development of validation is governed through a definition of what validation is and is not. Even if there are different ideas present in the policy text, it is still the formal and structured process that takes precedence rather than validation as a more informal aspect of an educational process, and these ideas are reproduced in a similar way at the local level.

Conclusion

The governmentality of an advanced liberal society is present in the governing of and through validation in Sweden. Municipalities and subjects are governed indirectly through policy, but not through rules and regulations. Thus, there is a double aspect of this indirect governing, the ‘conduct of conduct’ concerning validation. The national policy governs adult learning and the conduct of the adult learner (cf. Andersson and Fejes, 2005; Fejes and Andersson, 2007). But there is also a ‘second order’ indirect governing, where the state works to induce municipalities and regional actors to develop and organise validation, i.e. the local/regional level is expected to create the techniques that are to govern the adult learner. These techniques are not only techniques of indirect governing of the subject, but also techniques of governing through ‘measurement’ or examination, of creating new knowledge about the population as the basis of governing in a power-knowledge relation. However, the indirect governing through a policy of validation means that the national policy is both reproduced and transformed at the local level. This illustrates the relational character of power – the ‘conduct’ on the local political level is governed in a certain direction, but the results of governing in the specific case are not pre-determined.

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Notes on contributor

Per Andersson is Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer in Education at Linköping University, Sweden. His main research interest is educational assessment, and particularly recognition of prior learning. He recently edited a book together with Judy Harris entitled *Theorising the Recognition of Prior Learning* (2006, NIACE).