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# Mobility of knowledge as a recognition challenge: experiences from Sweden

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Mobility of knowledge as a recognition challenge

- experiences from Sweden

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**Abstract** 

This article focuses on the tensions between mobility, knowledge, and recognition, and what the impact of migration could be on lifelong education and society. This is discussed with the case of Sweden as the starting point. The main issue in Sweden concerning migration is the admission of refugees. Sweden has had a relatively open policy concerning refugees in recent decades, and a large number of refugees have also been granted residence permits. Thus, they have not come to Sweden due to a labour shortage, and the demand for their knowledge in the labour market has not been high. Their knowledge is not recognized in terms of employment in vocations where their prior learning could be utilized. This means that Sweden has faced challenges concerning questions of recognition and lifelong education. In this article, we take as our starting point the policy in this area, including policy texts and national initiatives as well as experiences from such initiatives, to discuss the role of lifelong education and recognition of prior learning in a situation where mobility concerns not only migration of people but also of knowledge. We discuss how this knowledge, which has been situated in another national context, can be recognized and included in further lifelong education, and what type of lifelong education or lifelong learning is needed in this situation.

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#### Introduction

The age of transnational migration is characterized by mobility, a mobility that is sometimes voluntary but often more or less imposed upon people. This mobility of people also involves a mobility of knowledge. However, the mobility of knowledge is not unproblematic. If knowledge is understood as being situated in its context, mobility results in a huge challenge concerning the recognition of knowledge, or recognition of prior learning. This article focuses on the tensions between mobility, knowledge, and recognition, which are possible consequences of migration, and what the impact of migration could be on lifelong education and society. We will discuss this with the case of Sweden as our starting point.

The main issue concerning migration in Sweden today is the admission of refugees, something that is the result of imposed mobility. Sweden has had a relatively open policy concerning refugees in recent decades, and a large number of refugees have also been granted residence permits. They have not come to Sweden due to a labour shortage, and the demand for their knowledge in the labour market has not been high. Consequently, their knowledge is not necessarily recognized in terms of employment in vocations where their prior learning could be utilized. We have seen how the threshold that faces knowledge originally situated in foreign contexts is higher in vocations/professions without a labour shortage. This means that Sweden has faced challenges concerning questions of recognition and lifelong education. In this article, we will outline the policy initiatives in this area as well as experiences from such initiatives, to discuss the role of lifelong education and recognition of prior learning in a situation where mobility means not only migration of people but also migration of their situationally contextualized knowledge.

The present article is based on our prior research in the area of recognition of prior learning in Sweden. The aim is to provide an overview of how the problems of mobility, in terms of the recognition challenge, are enacted in this context. The article focuses on the following questions: How has immigration and immigrants' employment developed in Sweden? What policy concerning recognition of immigrants' prior learning has developed in Sweden? What central challenges have emerged in the practice of RPL for immigrants? The results and discussion concerning these three questions are based on data from and analyses of official statistics, policy documents, and field studies (observations and interviews) in different practices of RPL, respectively. We have been inspired by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger's (1998)

notions of community of practice and situated knowledge in our analysis, although we extend their notions by including more profoundly issues of power and power relations.

# Recognition and mobility of knowledge

Our focus is on what is often called recognition of prior learning (RPL), accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), or in Sweden and some other countries *validation* ('validering' in Swedish) (Andersson and Harris 2006). Policies and practices for recognising prior learning have developed in recent decades around the world. RPL initiatives are often related to mobility in one sense or another. It could be a matter of stimulating mobility in the labour market, particularly in times of structural changes and unemployment, or of widening access to higher education, or of meeting the recognition challenges related to migration, which is the focus of this article.

In RPL, it is not the prior learning per se of the candidates that different institutions give recognition for, but rather the results of their prior learning, that is, the formal and/or actual competence/knowledge, which institutions assess in different ways, for example, through methods such as interviews, portfolios, formal tests, and authentic assessments in workplaces. As indicated above, recognition is mostly related to processes of transfer/mobility of knowledge – in place and/or time. People need to get recognition for what they have learnt before, often in another context, to be able to use their knowledge – in terms of its use value and/or its exchange value – in the new context. It could be a matter of mobility between countries, or between workplaces, or from informal to formal learning contexts (from daily/working life to education). A recognition process could employ different methods and have different results. The results could be that the candidates gain admission to education or to working life, get credits/exemptions in study programs, and/or get formal/non-formal documentation of competence – e.g., certificates, CVs, etc. The demands on the assessment in RPL could be more or less strict – from equivalence to similarity compared to the demands on 'valid' knowledge in the 'new' context. That is, if equivalence is required, it is more difficult to give recognition to knowledge developed and situated in another context, while it is easier to give recognition when, instead, similarity is demanded, which means that more variation is accepted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For a deeper and broader analysis of RPL, see Andersson and Harris (2006).

Mobility is a broad concept that is related to the mobility of people, ideas, knowledge etc. between different contexts and positions, within and between societies. The concept of social mobility includes horizontal as well as vertical transitions of individuals, social objects, values etc. between social positions (Sorokin 1959). Mobility is often discussed as something 'good'. The 'good' mobility of individuals includes voluntary horizontal and ascending vertical mobility. But there is also another side of the coin – mobility could be not only voluntary but also imposed, or in other cases restricted, and vertical mobility could be descending.

Our focus in this article is mainly on mobility in terms of migration, including imposed migration – the mobility of refugees. A central aspect of the recognition challenge is related to precisely this imposed mobility. When mobility is voluntary – horizontal or vertical – and related to a demand in working life, working class immigrants get recognition in terms of admission to working life and employment. But for refugees, there is no outspoken demand for their knowledge, and it is much more difficult for them to get this actual recognition in terms of employment. Further, our results also touch on the aspect of restricted mobility, which could be the case for immigrants in their new country if they do not get recognition for their prior learning and not are accepted in the labour market. Our understanding of mobility in this article is therefore related to the perspective on knowledge and learning as situated, which is presented in the next section.

# Theoretical perspective

We want to problematise the recognition challenge related to mobility in terms of a situated perspective on knowledge. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), knowledge has a more or less situated character. If knowledge is situated in a context where it has been developed and used, and its value proven, it is not evident that this very knowledge retains its value and usefulness if it is transferred to a new context. To what extent could knowledge get recognition in a new context, and to what extent is it situated only in the 'old' context? The result could, in somewhat different mobility terms, be the experience of a descending vertical mobility. However, when persons are situated in the community, learning takes place in terms of participation in the community of practice, and they move more and more towards the 'centre' of the practice – i.e. their participation will be seen as 'fuller', and they probably experience an 'ascending vertical' mobility. Such a perspective can be helpful when trying to understand some of the problems faced when trying to recognize immigrants' vocational knowledge.

In relation to such ideas, the concept of community of practice is raised by Wenger (1998). He defines three elements of a community of practice. Mutual engagement means the mutual understanding of what it means to belong to a certain community and what the norms and values of that community are and how one interacts. The second element, joint enterprise, means the ability to understand what the community stands for and a feeling of shared responsibility for it. The third element, shared repertoire, contains common resources that could be seen as symbols for the community (cf. Nyström 2009). A newcomer within such a practice gains legitimacy by participation, she thus moves from the periphery to the centre.

However, such a perspective has been criticized for its lack of a notion of power relations (Contu and Willmott 2003, Köpsén 2008, Nyström 2009), for example, the relation between gender and learning (Tangaard 2006). Billett (2006) argues that 'these kinds of accounts fail to consider how power relations between the personal and social are experienced and enacted including the role of the subject as both an exerciser of power and being subject to it' (Billett 2006: 11). Contu and Willmott (2003) acknowledge that Lave and Wenger have a notion of power incorporated in their learning theory although it is an 'underdeveloped conception of the power-invested situatedness of learning' (Contu and Willmott 2003: 284). Unfortunately, they argue, most popularized versions of such a theory have not followed the route of analyzing the power relations more specifically. There is a lack of analysis where the focus is on what makes specific communities act/think in the way they do. Developing the ideas of Lave and Wenger (1991), they thus argue that one needs to take into account the wider conditions – historical, cultural, and social – that make possible a certain way of acting/thinking and they emphasize the need to incorporate concepts such as contradiction, ideology and conflict into analyses of situated learning. Fuller et al. (2005) pursue a similar argument and call for more detailed analyses of how power operates within communities of practices as power shapes boundaries that can either limit or make possible participation. They especially point to the need to see newcomer's dispositions as part of shaping a community of practice. Billett (2006), Contu and Willmott (2003) and Fuller et al. (2005) suggest an analytical path where the focus should be on power and power relations and how these operate within communities of practice.

Drawing on the above, our interest is directed at analyzing power relations that operate within practices of assessing immigrant's prior knowledge – practices that exclude, even if the ambition is to include. In a situation, where immigrants enter a new community of practice in

terms of a country and a new vocational practice, both as newcomers in this specific culturally shaped practice, and maybe as 'old timers' in terms of vocational competencies within the area where they are being recognized through RPL, interesting questions arise such as.: What knowledge counts and what does not count in the process of RPL? In what ways are the immigrants allowed to enter the new practice and what might the barriers against participation be? What are the conditions that make such distinctions possible and what role does ethnicity play in such a practice?

In the next section, we contextualise Sweden as an immigrant country and follow this with an introduction of Swedish RPL policy in general and in relation to immigrants specifically. Three central challenges in RPL practices are then problematised with a specific emphasis on issues of power. Finally, we discuss how immigrants' knowledge, which has been situated in another context (country), can get recognition and be included in further lifelong education, and what type of lifelong education or lifelong learning is needed in this situation.

# Sweden as an immigrant country – a contextualisation<sup>2</sup>

How has immigration and immigrants' employment developed in Sweden? In this section, we will introduce Sweden as an immigrant country serving as a contextualisation in relation to which we can understand the policies developed concerning RPL and the challenges posed within such systems.

Sweden is a relatively small country with a population of 9.3 million people (Statistiska centralbyrån 2009a). Migration has played a major part in the economic development of Swedish society as well as in the transformation into what is now an ethno-culturally diverse nation. However, it is a relatively young immigrant country. Today, 14% of the Swedish population were born abroad, compared with 1% in 1940 and 7% in 1970 (Ekberg and Rooth 2000, Statistiska centralbyrån 2009a). The older migration history is characterized mainly by emigration. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and with a peak in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the emigration patterns are similar to those of other Western European countries. During the 80-year period from 1851 to 1930, almost 1.2 million Swedes left for North America (Nationalencyklopedin 1991). The total Swedish population in 1930 was about 6 million, which means that

sented by Guo and Andersson (2006), Andersson and Osman (2008), and Andersson and Guo (2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The description of Sweden in this section of the article is based on work previously pre-

this emigration was very high. Even if there were refugees who came to Sweden during the Second World War, the country remained, at least until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, essentially a mono-cultural country.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1930s, there have been more immigrants than emigrants, but the number of immigrants in the 1930s and early 1940s was low. More extensive immigration started in the late 1940s and in the 1950s (Statistiska centralbyrån 2009b).

At that time, Sweden was a step ahead of many other European countries in terms of conditions for economic development. The Second World War did not have much impact on the country because it was not actively involved. The economy expanded significantly, but there was a lack of qualified labour. There was a discussion about a 'reserve of talent' or a 'reserve of ability' in the population (Härnquist 2003) and how this reserve could be educated and employed. Still, there was an immediate need for competent workers, and as a result of this need many skilled working class immigrants came to Sweden at the end of the 1940s and in the 1950s. In addition, a number of refugees came from Eastern European countries, for example, Hungarians fleeing the 1956 uprising. In the 1960s, there was still a large number of working class immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe and Greece (Gustafsson, Hammarstedt and Zheng 2004). The difference in the 1960s was that the immigrants had lower qualifications, as they were needed for less qualified positions in industry (Bevelander 2000). After the 1960s, decreasing labour demand led to a more restrictive immigration policy, and the number of immigrants from outside the Nordic countries declined (Gustafsson, Hammarstedt and Zheng 2004).

Since the mid-1970s, migration to Sweden has shifted from labour immigration to immigration primarily consisting of asylum seekers and refugees. Refugees came mainly from Chile in the 1970s, the Middle East in the 1980s, and the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East in the 1990s (Gustafsson, Hammarstedt and Zheng 2004). These shifts in the origins of immigrants can be seen in the following figures: In 1970, more than 90% of those born abroad came from Europe, and 60% of these from the Nordic countries. By the end of the 1990s, 30% of immigrants were born in the Nordic countries, 35% in other European countries, and 35% in countries outside Europe (Ekberg and Rooth 2000).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The Sami population in the northern part of Sweden should not be forgotten, but it has had little influence on the main culture of society.

The influx of refugees to Sweden in the mid-1980s and early 1990s coincided with the economic crisis in the 1980s. This crisis led to the restructuring of the Swedish economy, from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. In this process, immigrants, both new and old, were hit hard. The majority of them were employed in industries, in jobs that required little or no competence, and a lot of these jobs and industries were relocated to developing countries in Eastern Europe and Asia. Consequently, the loss of industrial jobs together with the influx of refugees contributed to a marginalization and exclusion of immigrants in Swedish society (Andersson and Osman 2008).

As discussed above, mobility of people also means mobility of knowledge or competence. But what competence do the migrants have, and how is it recognised in the new context? We will now see how the problem of recognition is indicated by employment rates, correspondence of employment to formal qualifications, influence of the origin of qualifications, and levels of earnings. This is also related to some relevant findings from other contexts outside Sweden.

# **Employment rates**

A comparison of employment rates among all Swedish immigrants aged 16–64, including those who have come as refugees, and a corresponding group of native Swedes shows significant differences in employment rates depending on immigrants' national origins, as well as changes over time. In 1969, the employment rate among immigrants from Finland and Yugoslavia was 120% of that for natives, and the corresponding rate for immigrants from Germany was 103%. That is, the immigrants were mainly working class and were given immediate recognition of their competence in terms of employment. A comparison with the figures for 1999 shows another picture – then, the rate for Finland was 93%, for Germany 89%, and 71% for the former Yugoslavia (Gustafsson *et al.* 2004). Thus, the situation has worsened for worker-class immigrants, as illustrated by the decreasing employment rate for immigrants from Finland and Germany. Further, an increasing number of refugees have contributed to a significantly lower employment rate in the (former) Yugoslavian group, compared to the Finnish and German groups. Finally, other immigrants who have come as refugees have problems getting a job – the average employment rate in 1999 among people from Africa and Asia was 62% of that for native Swedes (Gustavsson *et al.* 2004).

To sum up, we can see that the average unemployment in 2003 among 15-64 year old Swedish-born citizens was 4.8% (5.2% for men and 4.4% for women), compared to 11.1% for immigrants (12.7% for men and 9.5% for women) (Gustavsson et al. 2004). Further, it seems that the differences between the contexts where immigrants and their knowledge were originally situated and the Swedish context influence the degree of recognition in terms of employment. These varying employment rates depending on contexts of origin have been identified in a number of studies in different countries. For example, Barrett and Duffy (2008) show how better occupational attainments among earlier arrivals in Ireland could be explained by the changing national origins of immigrants rather than by an improved situation in general over time. Renaud and Cayn (2007) analyse employment among immigrants in Québec, and identify problematic differences between groups, where immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas outside the USA have significant problems compared to other groups. These problems are sometimes discussed in terms of racism and discrimination, which will be related to somewhat in the following sections. What should be noted here, in the Swedish context with a high number of refugees among immigrants, is that the difference between working class immigrants and refugees seems to be important when it comes to employment rates, and the difference in immigrant class co-varies with the context of origin.

# The role of qualifications

Sweden has a formal system for recognition of foreign academic credentials, which will be more fully elaborated on later in this article. If the foreign qualification is recognised as equivalent to a Swedish qualification, an individual is more likely to secure a qualified job. The difference between qualifications recognised as equivalent or non-equivalent is most significant in the health care sector, where a number of professions are regulated, and require formal authorisation or certification. Here, 80% of those with an equivalent qualification have a qualified job, compared with only 20% of those with non-equivalent qualifications. In the technical/scientific area, the corresponding figures are 56% and 36%. Further, many working immigrants are employed within the area of their qualification, but at a lower level. That is, employers have employees with relevant qualifications that are not being fully utilized or remunerated. This means that there is considerable existing competence that could be recognised and utilised (Berggren and Omarsson 2001). In other words, there is a potential for employing RPL, particularly as these employees are already participating in the community of practice of the workplace, and it should be possible to assess the prior learning that is relevant

and valuable in their new work community, which in turn would help them to participate more fully in this practice.

However, if such RPL practices are to be further developed, the potential problem of discrimination between different groups should be taken seriously. We have shown that there are differences in employment rates depending on context of origin. Buzdugan and Halli (2009) who furthermore identify how the devaluation of foreign education varies and indicates racial discrimination – 'it can be argued that while some white immigrants encounter devaluation of their foreign credentials, visible minority immigrants face a lack of recognition of foreign education' (ibid., p. 383).

#### **Earnings**

Another indicator of recognition in working life is earnings. In Sweden the average earnings of immigrants are lower than for those born in Swedish, which reflects both the lower employment rate and the often part-time nature of immigrants' work. In 1999, the average earnings of men born outside Sweden were 61% of those born in the country, and the corresponding figure for women was 69% (Gustafsson et al. 2004). Here too, there are big differences depending on country of origin. Immigrants from the Nordic countries, Western Europe and North America, who are mainly working class immigrants, have slightly lower earnings, and immigrants from countries outside Europe, who are mainly refugees, have much lower earnings. Eastern and Southern Europe are somewhere in between but there are also differences depending on when different groups came to Sweden. For example, in 1999, men from Finland earned 82% of the earnings of Swedish-born men, and women from Finland 101% of Swedish-born women. The corresponding figures for people from the USA were 96% for men and 80% for women; the figures for Hungary were 71% and 87%, for Chile 55% and 68%, for Bosnia 43% and 44%, for Iraq 21% and 16% and for Somalia 16% and 17% (Gustafsson et al. 2004). This shows clearly the differences between countries/contexts of origin, arrival times and reasons for migration in terms of position in the labour market. The racial factor is not explicitly present in the Swedish debate on these issues. However, the figures can be compared with the results presented by Nakhaie (2007) who, in the Canadian context, identifies the main income gap between visible-minority and British male immigrants. In addition to these differences, the fact that immigrants who have studied mainly in Sweden earn about the same as native Swedes, and more than those who have studied abroad (leGrande et al. 2004) could indicate that a major problem is also the non-recognition of foreign credentials and work experience. This problem will be discussed further on in this article.

# Policy and development of RPL in Sweden

The development of immigration has, among other things, resulted in a growing interest in the recognition of foreign vocational competence. The initiatives implemented to respond to this recognition challenge, and to facilitate the inclusion of immigrants in the new community, have included a number of pilot programs for recognition of prior learning (validation). The word *validation* was first mentioned in Swedish adult education policy in 1996 (Ministry of Education 1996). RPL, or validation, was introduced as a tool which could be used to assess and document the knowledge already acquired through prior learning, no matter where this knowledge had been developed. The hope was, and still is, that this will make it possible to use and acknowledge people's knowledge, and shorten their participation in adult education. In the early 2000s, validation was also introduced at the university level, where the focus was on the assessment of 'real [actual] competence' for assessing eligibility for admission and for credit.

It should be noted that the introduction of the term validation did not introduce a totally new idea. Assessment and documentation of prior learning have taken place in many different historical contexts, for example, within the guilds or the church during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in Sweden (Fejes and Andersson 2007). The discussion concerning the 'reserve of talent/ability' in the 1950s, and the introduction of new measures to recognize different backgrounds and broaden access to higher education in the 1970s are also examples of how the idea has earlier turned up in policy and practice (Andersson and Fejes 2005), but with the introduction of the concept of *validation*, a stronger emphasis was placed on developing processes where the individual's knowledge, no matter where it had been acquired, was acknowledged. However, the problems that might arise in such processes, as we can see from a situated learning perspective, are not reflected upon in policy.

#### RPL at upper secondary level

As a consequence of the introduction of validation in education policy, the government introduced and funded a pilot project aimed at developing methods for and systems of recognition of prior learning especially focused on the upper secondary level (Ministry of Education 1998, Ministry of Education 2001, Andersson, Fejes and Ahn 2004). Adult education at the

upper secondary level, and particularly vocational adult education, is closely related to labour market measures. As a first step, the pilot project was aimed at recognizing immigrants' vocational competence. The idea presented was that immigrants had knowledge which could be assessed and credited in relation to the curriculum. Consequently, they would not have to study as many years as they otherwise would have had to do to acquire a Swedish upper secondary diploma. This policy measure and pilot project was part of the creation of rules which now allow anyone to have their prior learning assessed and get a grade that is equal to grades from the corresponding course in municipal adult education. Further, validation centres that focus on assessing people's prior learning have emerged. RPL at this level has become a policy measure that focuses on the relation between education and labour market. However, the labour market policy of the present government has been focused on getting people into the labour market, and education and validation have been seen as the long way round compared to being employed without such measures. But in the present economic situation, it seems likely that new labour market measures including education and validation could be introduced.

# RPL for immigrants at university level<sup>4</sup>

Recognition at university level is a system separate from that at the upper secondary level. Here, we will focus on RPL targeting immigrants. Sweden has a national system for evaluation and recognition of foreign qualifications, where foreign degrees are assessed in terms of their equivalence to Swedish counterparts. The National Agency for Higher Education evaluates higher education programmes leading to the recognition of a qualification for at least two years. This evaluation does not mean that a Swedish qualification is awarded, but is intended to provide guidance for employers. The process of assessment and evaluation is only open to those who have complete and documented qualifications. Those who have not, for example, refugees who have fled from their native country, are not included. Additionally, an evaluation does not guarantee that a qualification is recognised in terms of a Swedish qualification. On the contrary, it is only seen as a recommendation for employers and higher education institutions, and the actual recognition depends on processes in these specific communities of practice.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> This section of the article is based on the Swedish part of a study presented by Andersson and Guo (2009).

If one requires recognition in terms of a Swedish qualification, one first has to be admitted to and become a participant in the required programme in question at a university or university college. These institutions are obliged to assess the actual competencies<sup>5</sup> of applicants who lack formal eligibility. A right to the recognition of this actual competence in relation to admission requirements (eligibility) has been introduced nationally by the government. However, even this first step of assessment in terms of admission can be problematic for foreign professionals. The requirement for eligibility is to be able to study at higher educational institutions, which is normally assessed via high school (upper secondary level) records rather than professional experience and credentials. An assessment of 'actual competence' means that proof other than Swedish school records should be recognized, but it is still normally necessary to speak/read Swedish as most courses are in Swedish, which is an obstacle for immigrants.

Second, for those who are admitted, recognition for credit is also possible. An evaluation by the National Agency of Higher Education of foreign credentials, and/or other proof, might be used as the basis for decisions concerning credit. This can make the path to a Swedish qualification shorter, but the evaluation from the National Agency is no guarantee for credit – as mentioned, it is only a recommendation. Further, there is no system for assessment and recognition of professional competence developed in working life. Working life competence is not necessarily equivalent to the requirements of higher education, and is more or less excluded in this system.

The system for recognition of foreign qualifications in Sweden described above is mainly for 'non-regulated' professions. In certain 'regulated professions' where formal authorisation, certification etc. are required (e.g., teachers, physicians and attorneys-at-law), the qualifications are subject to the review of the responsible professional and regulatory authorities – the relevant community of practice is not the university but a certain professional community. For example, the National Board of Health and Welfare assesses foreign qualifications of physicians and other professions in the health care sector, and the qualifications of teachers are assessed by the National Agency for Higher Education. This system of recognition is somewhat different in that it looks at the requirements of the workplace to a greater extent than the system for non-regulated professions described above.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Actual (in Sweden named 'real') competencies include all competencies a person has, as opposed to the formal competence which only includes what is formally documented.

# Challenges when recognizing immigrants' vocational knowledge

What central challenges have emerged in the practice of RPL for immigrants? In this section, we will discuss parts of results from prior studies we have conducted of RPL projects. The aim is to raise some important issues in relation to RPL targeting immigrants. We will focus on the importance of the vocational language, the sorting mechanisms inherent in RPL, and the problems of transfer of knowledge between contexts.

# Importance of vocational language skills

When recognising immigrants' prior learning, one is also, more or less explicitly, assessing the language skills of the immigrants. In one of our studies of pilot projects (Andersson *et al.* 2003a), where we focused on recognition of vocational competencies at the upper secondary level, we noticed how Swedish language skills of the immigrants were seen as important. Even though an immigrant might be a vocational expert, she or he is entering the community of practice (the vocational practice in Sweden) as a newcomer in terms of language skills. As language is one of the important tools we use to learn in the social context of which we are part (cf. Vygotsky 1978), special attention needs to be focused on how language skills are defined and mobilized within practices of RPL. Here, questions of power become important. Who defines what language skills need to be assessed, and how is the assessment conducted? Are there measures taken to enhance the opportunities to enter the new community of practice?

In our interviews with teachers and project leaders, there were clear references to the need for good Swedish language skills in the Swedish labour market as it is important to be able to communicate with colleagues and customers. Without sufficient language skills, it is argued, we risk being excluded from the work community, and there is a risk that we will not be able to do good work. Through such statements, we can see how power operates and through its operation, it defines what is necessary and not necessary to know. Here, there are assumptions about the need to know good Swedish as a vocational worker. Further, definitions that exclude at the same time as they intend to include can be seen in the criteria used for gaining access to the RPL process. In our studies, language skills were often used as criteria when selecting those who were allowed to enter the practice of RPL. One main reason used to argue for such criteria was that the assessors needed to be able to understand the ones they were assessing. Otherwise, they would not be able to see what the persons actually know (Andersson *et al.* 2003a).

However, in our studies we could also see that language demands were typically flexible and therefore unpredictable. That is, there were no fixed criteria for what language knowledge was required to gain access such as a written curriculum or written guidelines and the demands were not the same in each practice. However, what was more or less stable was the idea that different vocations need different kinds of language skills, i.e. there is a distinction made between general language skills and vocational language skills. What seemed to be important in the validation process in general was the vocational language skills, e.g. if you were a hairdresser, you needed to know the Swedish terms for different hairstyles, for different scissors, etc. Based on our interviews with immigrants, teachers and project leaders, a picture was outlined that those with good Swedish vocational language skills could more easily express their knowledge, while those with poor vocational language skills had problems in expressing their knowledge. A consequence of this was that the assessment of prior learning also included an assessment of the vocational language skills. In other words, those with poor vocational language skills (newcomers in terms of language skills) did not get a fair assessment in full in terms of their vocational skills as they might have more knowledge and competencies than they were able to illustrate during the assessment process.

When interviewing the immigrants being assessed, language was the main problem raised by them (Andersson *et al.* 2003a). Not only did they feel that their language skills were not sufficient, they also heard it from their surrounding, teachers and supervisors. Consequently, many of them wanted to have more language training parallel with the process of validation. As an immigrant, you are offered language training in courses in Swedish directed at immigrants specifically. However, another context where language training could take place, which was argued for by some of the project leaders we interviewed, was the workplace. Being in a workplace was seen as helping the immigrant to learn the Swedish language of a certain vocation. Each vocation has specific terms which need to be learned if the immigrant is to be able to fully express her/his vocational knowledge. In one way, this could be seen as being in line with a situated view of knowledge and learning. Being in such a context, as a newcomer in terms of language, one becomes part of a certain community in which one interacts with values, language and knowledge produced in this context (Wenger 1998). However, according to our interviews the workplace where the immigrant should learn the language should not be a place where her/his countrymen work as this would not be a good environment for learning

Swedish. There were examples in our study where this was the case and it resulted in them mostly speaking their native language instead of Swedish.

So far, we can see how vocational language skills seem to be important when recognizing immigrants' prior learning at the upper secondary level. Even though language skills are still important when recognizing immigrant academics' prior learning, there do not seem to be the same problems when it comes to learning Swedish. In another study, where we focused on immigrant academics and their validation process (Andersson *et al.* 2003b), we noticed how the issue of language was not as large as that of the immigrants having their knowledge recognized at upper secondary level. The reason seemed to be that the academics were more used to studying, and thus more easily picked up the Swedish language. That is, they were more familiar with the practice of studying, although in another cultural context.

To conclude this section, we can see how power operates to exclude as it includes. Language is construed as a major concern in the process of RPL, especially vocational language skills. The need for good Swedish is seen as a way to be able to make a fair assessment of the immigrant's knowledge, and as a way to be able to enter the Swedish labour market. Opportunities for learning Swedish are offered in the form of courses and workplace placements. However, even though such way of reasoning might be based on wishes to be supportive, there is also exclusion. Diffuse and differing language criteria might lead to exclusion in several ways. The immigrant might not be allowed to enter the process of RPL; not being fairly assessed in relation to the vocational competencies, not being able to enter the Swedish labour market. Thus, language differences act as a gatekeeper that might lead to marginalisation and exclusion. Consequently, in the practices of RPL, there is a need to take into account and find different ways of approaching the issue of language. One starting point could be to acknowledge that the immigrants are newcomers to the vocational practices in terms of language skills, even though they might be experts in terms of their vocational knowledge.

# RPL as a sorting mechanism

Further studies of three Swedish urban validation centres (Andersson, Hult and Osman 2006, Andersson and Osman 2008) show how recognition of prior learning is used as an instrument for sorting, classifying, and including or excluding immigrants in/from vocational communities in the Swedish labour market. The sorting mechanism inherent in RPL is identified in

different ways. It is not only a matter of the formal assessments made via the validation process, there is also a sorting mechanism on a structural level. That is, certain vocations are chosen and included in the RPL opportunities – a choice not primarily based on what vocational competence immigrants have, but on the demands of certain vocations in the labour market. From the perspective applied in the present article, this is about opportunities of entering relevant communities of practice where prior learning could be used and recognition acquired.

Another example of the sorting mechanism in the system is the de-grading of competence that was enacted in some vocational areas. In some cases, teachers with a teacher training from another country were included in a validation process — not to get a teaching certificate of the type mentioned above, but to be assessed as child minders. That is, the validation was made in the vocational area of the candidate (here, pedagogical work), but on a lower level, resulting in what we have referred to as a descending vertical mobility. This structural problem is related to the fact that municipalities run these validation centres, and they can only provide vocational education and validation at the secondary level, while teacher education, for example, is provided by universities and university colleges. The result is that these teachers are included in the community of pedagogical work, but they are not allowed to participate fully as professional teachers.

A final example of the sorting mechanism is the informal aspect of the assessment process. The validation results not only in formal documents – grades, certificates, etc. – the assessments also have an informal dimension. Teachers making the assessments often have close relations to local labour market actors, and their informal recommendations are often important to get, from the candidates' perspective, the most important recognition – employment.

These studies show how the practices of validation in different ways contribute to a 'mis-recognition' of immigrants' vocational experiences and knowledge that affects the incorporation of immigrants in their areas of competence – the relevant communities of practice – in the Swedish labour market.

# Transfer of knowledge from one context to another

One main issue related to mobility and raised in several of our studies (see e.g. Andersson *et al.* 2003a, 2003b, 2004) is the question of transferability and comparability of knowledge between contexts. How does one assess vocational knowledge created in one country/specific

context in relation to the knowledge required and deemed essential in another country and context? For example (Andersson et al. 2003a), if a person has learned construction work in a country according to traditional standards and in relation to country-specific kinds of buildings, what value does such knowledge have in relation to the standards of construction work in Sweden? Here, we can draw further on socio-cultural theories of learning, and their focus on the importance of the context of learning (e.g. Wenger 1998, Vygotsky 1978). As we have shown, such theorization is helpful for understanding the problem of recognizing immigrants' vocational knowledge. The community of practice of which they have been part differs from other communities. Their knowledge and values are most likely somewhat different. Thus, when they are being assessed in Sweden, the assessors represent another community of practice with other values and knowledge highlighted. The immigrants are not really assessed on their own terms as we could see in the former section concerning language skills. Here, we could further argue that the criteria for assessment in the vocational curriculum, e.g. in construction work, is defined in terms of Swedish conditions and traditions. Thus, even though the immigrant being assessed might be an expert in terms of construction work, this is related to another community of practice. This problem is particularly relevant when we discuss refugees compared to working class immigrants. As we have seen, in the 1950s and 1960s, many working class immigrants came to Sweden due to a labour shortage, and the recognition problem was not important. There was a demand of their competence, and they were employed even if they had a background in a somewhat different community of practice. But later, when immigrants have mainly been refugees, the recognition challenge and the problem of transfer is evident. There is no particular demand for the refugees' knowledge in the labour market, and refugees come regardless of unemployment or labour shortages. In addition to this, they often belong to visible minorities, which makes the issue of racial discrimination relevant as a dimension of the recognition problems, even if this is beyond the particular scope of this article.

Would it then be possible to tackle this challenge differently? Could knowledge be assessed in the practice where it has been acquired? In one way, this would be difficult, as it would require a system of assessment where individuals are assessed in their workplaces in their native countries. A more feasible way to do this might be to make the assessment context as 'authentic' as possible. One could ask the people being assessed to carry out tasks they normally do in their workplace in their native country, and the assessor could be a person who is well versed in the vocational knowledge of specific countries. However, the challenge of recogni-

tion is even more complex. Vocational knowledge is strongly related to the ideas of the labour market, which is its context. Consequently, even if immigrants are assessed and get recognition based on the vocational practice where they have been members, this does not necessarily mean that their knowledge has use value or exchange value in the new (in this case Swedish) labour market. For example, construction work is and has to be different in different countries/contexts – the way houses are built is not only a matter of culture, but also a matter of the local climate, which places specific demands on the construction to make it possible to live in a house all the year around. A possible way forward in order to, at least to some extent, overcome this dilemma is discussed in the final section of this article.

#### **Discussion**

In this article, our aim has been to describe and analyze how immigration has developed in Sweden and what policy measures have been taken to tackle such immigration in terms of recognition of the immigrants', and among them in particular refugees', prior learning. We have also discussed some of the problems faced in RPL practices in relation to immigrants' prior learning from a perspective of learning as being situated in specific communities of practice. As illustrated, migration and mobility have – in the last decade – become an important issue in Sweden and in policymaking in education. As one of the solutions proposed for dealing with high unemployment rates among immigrants, the Ministry of Education has initiated the development of systems and methods of RPL. The idea of RPL has, among other thing, been to handle the transfer of knowledge between contexts, i.e. to recognize knowledge acquired in another country in relation to Swedish grades and diplomas. Through such a process, immigrants will, according to policy texts, be able to shorten their Swedish education.

However, such an ambition is not without problems. Transferring knowledge from one context to another is a challenge. Drawing on theories of situated learning, we conceptualize knowledge as context specific, while we acknowledge issues of power and power relations. Recognizing knowledge developed within a vocation in another country is, as we have argued based on our previous studies, problematic. Firstly, the context in which the person is being assessed is different as it is a new community of practice the immigrant is entering (in terms of vocational practice and language skills), and therefore immigrants' knowledge is valued in relation to other kinds of knowledge demands and another practice compared to those demands and the practice in which their own knowledge was developed. Secondly, the one making the assessment most likely participates in other communities of practice and has the power

to decide what counts as good and bad knowledge. As we could see in the example of language skills, the requirement was not clear and differed between RPL practices depending on who made the assessment. Thus, there is to some extent an incompatibility from the very beginning. Further, if you cannot express yourself with terms used in the vocation in which you are being recognized, there is a risk that you will not get a fair result in the recognition process.

Accordingly, we argue that there is a need for people involved in practices of RPL to acknowledge that the immigrants are newcomers in terms of language, and to the specific Swedish vocational practice, while they might be experts in relation to the vocational practice where they have developed their knowledge. In such way, it might be possible to find different solutions and ways to re-shape the assessment procedures and practices in ways that lead to inclusion rather than exclusion. Other exclusionary practices created in the intersection of mobility, knowledge and recognition are, for example, the definition by the labour market of which vocations should develop RPL opportunities, or the problem of the degrading of knowledge when an immigrant academic is only given the opportunity to become recognized at an upper secondary school level. The last example is related to the separation of and differences between upper secondary and university level presented earlier in the article. Different levels of bureaucracy have different rules and regulations and do not always work together, which causes problems for the individuals.

How would it be possible to handle these problems in a way that makes it easier for immigrants/refugees to have their prior learning recognized? One possible way forward could be to try to avoid seeing RPL mainly as a process where immigrants, and Swedes, have their knowledge recognized in relation to grades from upper secondary school or in relation to university degrees, i.e. RPL as a separate activity. Instead, one could see RPL as an integrated aspect of a learning process where the focus is on the knowledge and competencies the person has in the specific work context in which he/she works. The latter definition is described as 'rpl' as opposed to 'RPL' – recognition of prior learning as an integrated aspect of a learning process as opposed to Recognition of Prior Learning as a separate activity (Breier 2005). With such a focus, it would be possible to integrate the educational system with the workplace. This can, for example, be seen in one of our studies (Fejes and Andersson 2009) where we analyze how health-care assistants (HCA) in the elderly-care sector had their knowledge, which they had developed through years of working in elderly care, recognized during work-

ing hours. Through collaboration between the funder of elderly care (a municipality), the employers (a municipality or a private company) and educational providers, the curriculum for the health care programme at the upper secondary school level was mobilized with the participating HCAs during working hours. Through group discussions under the supervision of a teacher, and through written essays, the HCA's prior learning was recognized in relation to the curriculum. Thus, they were able to receive a diploma from upper secondary school in a much shorter time than would otherwise have been the case.

If this kind of RPL process were used more generally within other vocations, there would, of course, still be the problem of recognizing knowledge developed in another context. However, by being in the work context – during a period of practical training or, if possible, employment – the immigrant would have the opportunity to become part of a new community of practice where prior learning could be recognized and integrated with the learning process, which takes place as a result of being in a new practice. In this way, the vocational part of lifelong education would move from mainly being part of the educational system to becoming part of working life. Such a shift in practices of RPL in Sweden would be in line with a shift from speaking of lifelong education to speaking about lifelong learning. Even though such a shift and use of language is problematic in many ways (e.g. Fejes and Nicoll 2008), it could be fruitful to use them when speaking about how to face the challenge of the mobility of knowledge. Furthermore, processes helping immigrants to enter new communities of practice could contribute to reducing discrimination based on misrecognition or non-recognition as well as on other factors.

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