Adult Education Goes to Market: an ethnographic case study of the restructuring and reculturing of adult education

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ABSTRACT The restructuring of adult education in Göteborg was first initiated experimentally with respect only to SFI education (an education in beginning Swedish for ethnic minorities living in Sweden). This was done on the basis of decisions in the Göteborg Municipal Council in 1999. But restructuring came into full force for all municipal adult education in the Göteborg municipality later in 2002, after the completion of the National Adult Education Initiative (AEI). The restructuring processes followed guidelines for franchise in the public sector as per the 1992 Purchasing Act and had consequences for all education suppliers, but in particular one of them, Studium AB. This was a company created and owned by the Göteborg Metropolitan Council that had been established in order to safeguard the provision of the municipally owned adult education public service previously known as Komvux. This 'humanist' form of comprehensive adult education has a strong history in Sweden, within the provision of adult education on a 'folk-home' basis. Studium AB had been the single largest provider of adult education in Göteborg up until the franchise but lost its mandate in the tendering processes. Although it concentrates mainly on 'talk-data' the present article has been developed from an ongoing ethnographic case study of the effects of restructuring in Göteborg.

Introduction
The restructuring of adult education in Göteborg is the subject of the present article. This restructuring was initiated on the basis of decisions in the Göteborg Municipal Council in 1999 to tender out adult education in the region in order, formally, to reduce costs and make adult education more responsive to a new service economy, new employment needs in the Göteborg
region and the needs of individuals seeking employment there. These decisions came into full force in 2002, after the completion of the National Adult Education Initiative (the AEI).[1] They followed guidelines for franchise in the public sector, as per the 1992 Purchasing Act, and had consequences for all education suppliers, but in particular one of them, Studium Göteborg AB. This was a company that was established by the Göteborg Metropolitan Council on May 16, 2001 when it converted the municipal adult education service Komvux into a municipally owned company, to take part in tendering processes and to safeguard the provision of community owned adult education in the region. At the time of its inauguration Studium was the largest provider of adult education in Göteborg but lost its mandate in tendering and most of its delivery under its first 18-months of existence. It was plunged onto the brink of bankruptcy in 2002 when the outcomes of the evaluations of tender were put into practice and is now defaulted. The local tax-based economy footed the bill of the conversion process, the tendering of adult education and the salary costs of the under employment in Studium that resulted, as most of the staff there had guaranteed tenure as public employees. This situation of public funds paying for the conversion of public services into private ones seems to be a consistent element of restructuring according to international research (see, for example, Dale, 1997; Whitty, 1997; Whitty et al 1998; Whitty & Power, 2003; Sharpe, 2003; Beach, 2004).

Our research on restructuring has been constructed as an ethnographic case study of the introductory education in Swedish for ‘new citizens’. These are mainly recent immigrants and refugees. The title of this education in direct translation from Swedish is Swedish for Immigrants and it generally travels under the acronym SFI. SFI is important in relation to the formal restructuring of adult education in Göteborg as restructuring was initiated first there, experimentally, on the basis of decisions in the Göteborg Municipal Council in 1999 to reorganise SFI along the lines of a market. Marketisation then came into full force in 2002, after the full-scale tendering of adult education in Göteborg mentioned above but without any evaluation of the experimental tendering process in SFI.

At the time that we designed our investigation of SFI, Studium was the main supplier of SFI in the region and for this reason was chosen as the main case. It was an established deliverer with a long social memory and established routines and social and practical discourses, some of which would be troubled, we anticipated, by restructuring. A local policy for developing SFI in the Göteborg region had been adopted in 2000, entitled ‘the collective renewal of SFI’. This became incorporated into the title of a research project proposal that we successfully submitted to the Educational Sciences Section of the Swedish Research Council in 2001. The present article has been written from within that project. The project title in English is ‘Competing Discourses in Restructuring: An Ethnographic Case Study of the Collective Renewal of Swedish For Immigrants in Göteborg’.
Tendering Adult Education in Göteborg

A common way in which restructuring is accomplished is via voucher systems. This model of provision was developed for restructuring welfare services in the USA by Freidman and Freidman (see, for example, Freidman & Freidman, 1980) in the 1980s as part of an orchestra of right-wing economic policies that contributed to a massive conversion of public wealth to private revenue (McMurtry, 1998; Gustafsson, 2002) but they have been used extensively elsewhere since then, including in the Nordic countries (Gordon et al, 2003).

There are risks with voucher systems for the political control of education and other public services as they can shift almost all political control of education and service content to market forces. Because of this politicians in the public sector have often recommended a second form of restructuring that uses the principle of franchise and involves the (local or national) government establishing a monitoring and commissioning agency within government administration to negotiate the purchase of welfare services on the basis of tenders from organisations outside of the state bureaucracy. This represents a quasi-market where rather than direct interactions between suppliers and final consumers determining supply, the (local or State) government establishes agencies (sometimes termed quangos) to mediate between individuals, the State and capital by monitoring consumer needs and allocating customers to suppliers, who are then paid for services by public money (Ball, 1997, 2003; Dale, 1997; Whitty et al, 1998). This was the way adult education was opened up to market forces by the Göteborg Municipal Council (GMC) when it constituted what became known as the Adult Education Board as a purchasing agency for the supply of adult education in the Göteborg region on December 16, 1998 and a supply and demand monitoring and dispersal agency known as SPA (Lokvux) for controlling the flow of students to suppliers and for ‘tracking’ these students through their education, which was also monitored by the appropriation of a standardised quality assurance scheme. The model for restructuring used in Göteborg became known as ‘The Göteborg Model’ (Figure 1). It was not unique to Göteborg but it was specifically recognised nationally and locally as the GMC response to an economic crisis in the service sector.

The Gothenburg Model was definitely not a traditional market model as it actually allowed politicians to control education delivery to citizens in two steps. These were (i) by imposing a restriction on the number of actors on the market and (ii) by setting up an agency (the SPA) to identify education recipients and allocate them to suppliers within a system that the Adult Education Board monitored.
All of the above developments are fairly typical for education restructuring in the current global context (Dale, 1997; Whitty et al, 1998; Wass, 20003; Sharpe, 2003), in that what they imply is both an extension of the operational range of a system of politically controlled education delivery and significant changes in the discourses and practices of political control itself in the direction of neoliberalism. A market has been created for adult education deliverers, but the Adult Education Board is the only effective legal customer and key aspects of market discourses – such as ‘competition between suppliers’ and ‘enhanced freedom of choice’ – are placed ‘offside’, because both the question of which education supplier is given a contract for which educations, and the question of to which education supplier students are finally directed, lies in the hands of politicians, bureaucrats and labour market representatives not individual user-recipients and suppliers. These limitations are striking when looked at from the perspective of field data (cf Carlson, 2004). According to field notes for instance, far from free choices being made available to adult education SFI students, students have simply been relocated from old to new suppliers. Indeed the system seems to tie up the social practice of education supply in several different ways. This was commented on as follows in some of our recent interviews:

One of the things that was said ... was that pupils [sic] would have more freedom of choice ... But things became very steered ... None of the SFI pupils were able to influence where they were to study ... What happened was that the AEB agreed on a volume from different suppliers and tied up the system to contracts that determine where individuals will be placed ... There are some different suppliers in the same area. But I don’t know how the adult education authority deals with requests from students with regard to this. You can hope that they try to fulfil requests as far as possible but there are limits (because of) commitments within framework agreement. (Barbara, a former Studium teacher)
A former Dean of SFI at Studium (and before that Komvux), Betty, also speaks in line with this kind of argument concerning the steering effects of the contracts:

The initial suggestions were that the individual should have the right to choose their supplier ... but that’s not how things turned out, because the buyer has agreed on a volume from different suppliers and has ... tied up the system ... Contracts determine where individuals are placed ... Choice has become very restricted ... (Betty, former Dean of SFI at Studium)

The concept freedom of choice was one of the concepts that was used most frequently in local policy documents in the run in to the restructuring of SFI (Beach & Carlson, 2002, 2003; Carlson, 2004) and was also intensively discussed locally both prior to and during the major reorganisation process and the full-scale tendering of adult education. There were however strong disagreements about what the concept actually stood for and in what way it was meant to work. This is not uncommon of course. As for instance also Ball & Bowe (1989) have put it, concepts in policy texts are often loosely defined in these ways and often operate in practice at fairly high levels of abstraction to both open up and close down interpretive possibilities for the activities they are said to relate to (also Beach, 1995). Furthermore, both context and contextual relations are important in the ways concepts are understood and responded to.

Particularly concepts with strong positive connotations such as the just mentioned ‘freedom of choice’, ‘variation’, ‘quality’ and ‘knowledge’ have varied social meanings in different discourses and speech contexts and there are instances where people can quite prolifically change the meanings of notions within the same argument (cf. Baumann 1996, Smith 1993, Talja 1999, Wetherell & Potter 1988, 1992). And this means that even though our interviewees generally articulated strong agreement with statements that suggested that ‘there hasn’t been any real freedom of choice provided by the reorganisation of adult education, at least not for course participants’ (Barbara), and some informants have even declared that they even ‘see an increased amount of organisational control in the new situation with concomitant reductions in individual freedom of choice’ (Betty), there are differences of interpretation with respect to the meaning of this concept. One of the school leaders within SFI, Vera Friman asks if there were any SFI participants who had been given a chance to choose once the present set of agreements about delivery were put in place.

One of the things that was said at the time of the franchising process was that pupils would have freedom of choice to study what they wanted where they wanted. But things became very steered. As far as I can see there wasn’t really any SFI pupil who was able to influence where they were to study. And that’s really funny when you consider that even children in comprehensive school and upper-secondary school can do so.

When reasoning further about the lack of ‘freedom of choice’ for individuals, many of the interviewees mention issues of political power and a desire from
the local polity to exert greater control over education. One of them is Ken, a
former Studium teacher:

There’s competition now and the idea is that things will improve because
of competition ... But of course no one has been able to choose the public
service form of adult education because it doesn’t exist anymore (and) as
far as we are concerned the competition has not been on equal terms and
has in fact been terribly misfortunate. I can understand that the public
service form shouldn’t be the only game in town but the inclusion of more
suppliers has been badly managed ... It’s less a question of free competition
and more one of an odd form of political control ... Plus, the information
out to students about what is available, particularly in SFI, has not really
worked .... SPA has placed them with a supplier and has then said to them
‘either take it or leave it because there’s a queue and if you don’t use your
place we’ll give it to one of the six or eight hundred or whatever who are
waiting in line ...’

Two other former Studium teachers, Betty and Barbara, have expressed things
in similar terms, as has the former chairperson of the Studium Board of
Directors. However, there are other benefits of restructuring that have to be
weighed against restrictions in freedom of choice according to some of our
informants. For instance, according to Harold Spanks (former chairman of the
AEB) the expressed advantage of a quasi-market was that it enabled local
government to control education during an economic shortage without the
risks of ownership and without any great losses being suffered by the people
involved (see also City Auditor’s Report, Stadsrevision 2003). But of course this
depends on how ‘losses’ are calculated as well as on what definitions of what
counts as a loss are employed. When a public service monopoly such as
Komvux is legally and economically transformed into a limited company many
losses are incurred that are often ignored. These losses are not only direct
economic ones. Several other far reaching but often marginalised effects accrue
with respect to professional labour and professional identities as well, as these
become privatised and competitive items with a commodity value where
workers, instead of being public employees involved in the provision of services
in a client interest according to a defined need, take on the characteristics of the
value form of labour (also Beach, 2004). This is part of the ‘logic’ of a labour
process in which professional labour and the products of that labour are
exploited for economic gains (or savings) by others, and it occurs regardless of
the conscious personal experiences and values of the employees involved.

Different Notions of the Meaning of Change

The changes that were brought about in adult education in Göteborg after the
outcomes of tender were made public and then enacted in 2003 were talked
about in different ways in different fractions of the local adult education body.
This is very clear when we compare the talk from differently positioned agents.
However, what also becomes clear is that there also seems to be an obvious flow of ideas through the various social and political networks of adult education in Göteborg (cf. Popkewitz, 1996) and that the ideas that politicians and civil servants express don’t always find a comfortable home with the people who are working within education, closer to the chalk face so to speak.

A lot of the criticism that you could hear about Komvux (and after that Studium) was that it was rigid ... and for people who were already educationally successful ... And as I see it there wasn’t much interest either in trying to see how things really were ... There was mainly an idea that the education would improve once it was exposed to competition because the view was that increased competition gives improved quality ... But I think it was an economic question ... Opening up for competition was a thing of the times [but] at the bottom line the belief was that things would become cheaper ... They didn’t. Like the Auditors’ report pointed out they got more expensive and we’ll be paying for it through the tax budget for the next five years or more ... Not to mention the human cost ...
Furthermore now it’s form more than content that counts the most ... I’m teaching flex courses in this new fashionable education ... I have a mix of students ... with different needs ... studying at different rates and with different potentials ... The intention is to mentor them in a way, so they can pass the course and study ... when they can and where they can but I don’t think it works out well ... Most of the time goes to making individual study plans and hardly any goes to teaching the content ... (Ken, former Studium teacher)

Within the discursive order of change and the benefits of change a lot of the argumentation is founded upon a play of opposites – ‘finding new pathways’ versus ‘old’ and the importance of ‘breaking fixed patterns’. Restructuring in Göteborg is in this vein said to be about making something ‘new’ and different from ‘the old’ and in their descriptions of the need of change, especially local government politicians and ‘new’ civil servants recurrently give Studium (and the former Komvux) a ‘negative’ presentation in terms of being for example ‘old and stayed’ not ‘new and vibrant’, ‘wasteful’ not ‘effective’ and ‘traditional’ and ‘not flexible’ (see also Foss Fridlizius, 2003; Wass, 2003). This may be an example of what Ball has stated as being the way new policies often feed off and gain legitimacy from the deriding and demolition of previous ones (Ball, 1998, p. 125) and of the way new languages in use support or rather even perhaps constitute what can be called a new orthodoxy, where only some ‘solutions’ and not others are possible (cf. Fairclough, 1992; Potter, 1996; Ball, 1998; Beach 2000). Stronach (1993, p. 26) talks in this context also about the repetitive circularities of ‘the market solution’ that display ‘the logics of witchcraft and the structures of ritual’. Harry Boye, a former chief adult education officer in Göteborg, talks about the terms of opposition such as new and old and also uses the term myth in some of his expressions.
There was a lot of talk about renewal ... new forms of pedagogy ... new recruitment into education of needy individuals who were being ignored previously [and] enhanced affectivity and flexibility in the system ... But it’s a myth to think that just because you form a company you’ll get these things ... A company has ... a less complex steering system through its board, because company law says that a board cannot deal with any issue in any other way than that which is in the best economic interests of the company ... The economy of the company (and that means profits for its shareholders) must come first ... no matter what [and] the well being of the education in other respects must suffer if it compromises profits ... The new aim was ... to break fixed patterns and find new pathways to create a more effective organisation for the individual and make more use of the adult’s actual competencies ... Fixed structures were to be broken down ... Supply was to be expanded and new groups were to be recruited, particularly the unemployed and those with a shorter than average formal education. Education was to help them onto the labour market ... But things have gone far too quickly and have perhaps not been adequately reflected on ...

This reasoning can partly be compared with Ball’s discussion (1998, p. 124) of the advocacy of the market or commercial form of educational reform as the ‘solution’ to educational problems as a form of ‘policy magic’ (cf. Stronach, 1993) and is a way of reflecting on what is happening by questioning the changes that take place in terms of how necessary and or natural they are. Desired changes are often presented in these ways; i.e. as natural; in official versions of change, but they are still ‘questionable’ in the terms laid down by Stronach, Ball and others of similar mind and are of course also questioned by teachers and others on the inside of policy cycles and on the soft underside of policy processes (cf. Ball, 1987):

The claim is that the changes that are taking place are part of a natural progression ... that represents everyone’s best interests ... But this is questionable. The changes are costing not saving money, and at such an extent that it will take years to recoup the losses just from the re-adjustment project alone, not to mention the millions ... the new administration will cost ... The decision to restructure looks ... political and ideological. Costs have not been reduced, freedoms have not developed and content is not renewed. The public purse will foot the costs ... thus subsidising the conversion of welfare from public supply to private interest.

(Barbara, former Studium teacher)

‘Teachers’ voices are not usually privy to internal organisational details and most teachers did not put things in the way Barbara does above. What they more commonly expressed was a frustration over how ‘things that have been built up in a common/public interest over many years, are being torn down in the execution of an idea that seems necessary to push through whatever the
personal and professional costs may be' (Betty). Another teacher informant (Barbara) has put things in the following way:

Although we still have a guaranteed income, most of the former teachers in Studium have in a strict sense lost their old jobs and are currently involved in a readjustment project ... to help them find new workplaces within adult education or outside it, within the local government administration or outside it, or an education of some kind ... Many of the teachers were expected to move into the regular comprehensive or upper-secondary school sectors, particularly the former, where there is a degree of teacher shortage. However, many of us see this as a loss of professional identity and we have resisted the move ... and there have also been some heated exchanges at meetings between teachers and project leaders from the readjustment project ... with critical voices heard from teachers and union representatives ... Many teachers feel they will be asked to teach in areas that they are not qualified in and they protest against what they see as a view of professionalism in which the idea expressed seems to be that if you can teach one thing you can teach anything and once a teacher always a teacher ... The re-adjustment project is costing the taxpayer a lot of money everyday. What for?

The readjustment project mentioned above was established in order to deal with the problem of staff redeployment amongst the 400 plus Studium employees who had no teaching left after the autumn term 2002. Through it these former members of staff have re-entered higher education to be 'retrained as special educators' paid for by the GMC or have gone back into the education sector to teach or work as administrators and/or councillors or have remained in the project itself. Many of these teachers have described the confusion they have experienced regarding their future. One informant from outside of adult education, but who has been directly affected by restructuring there, expressed his experience as follows:

I have absolutely no idea what I’ll be doing this coming year and term starts in two weeks. I have taught philosophy and history at Alpha upper-secondary school but that was on a temporary contract and there are now 450 surplus adult education teachers to be redeployed and a calculated surplus within the upper-secondary sector already of over 100 teachers ... Just now it looks as though I’ll be working somewhere between 40 and 60 percent at Alpha and the rest here hopefully ... But there’s a real shortage of money ... and the number of independent schools has increased ... They use unqualified and inexperienced teachers often and are able to keep costs down and are taking students from us in ever increasing numbers ... Coupled to what happened in adult education over the last few months it is creating great confusion about employment for teachers who lack a permanent contract ... (Ronny)
Motivating Change

The GMC motivated the tendering of adult education in Göteborg in two main ways in formal documents and in public talks at various gatherings such as the meeting at Studium on September 18th 2002 mentioned earlier in the article. Firstly in terms of reducing the size of the municipally owned service apparatus as an economic necessity after the completion of the AEI programme and in the face of a severely reduced budget (Harold Spanks). Secondly, as part of a movement from large scale, regulated, comprehensive education, ‘to a flexible education arrangement that offered greater freedom of choice to individuals and was better able to respond to the varied needs and lives of adult learners’. However, we would suggest that restructuring hasn’t necessarily had these benefits. As also the City Auditor’s Report and teacher informants have expressed it, things haven’t become more flexible, money has not been saved and education processes have not involved more freedom of choice and self-determination for individuals and in the end, the events we have seen and documented can all be expressed as being about the moral justification of market interests and the further capitalisation of the labour processes of education. Furthermore, contrary to the dominant neo-liberalist discourse of change, changes have not been in everyone’s best interests as there have clearly been both winners and losers in the present situation.

The notion of there clearly being both winners and losers in restructuring is also suggested by variations in the voices of informants in the investigation and on the basis of who has got a major contract through the tendering processes and who hasn’t (also Beach & Carlson, 2003). In the present situation, in these senses and terms, the winners are (on the one hand) ‘an ideology of ... privatisation and market initiatives in education’ (Greta; Ken) and what in policy research is called ‘new managerialism’ – the insertion of the theories and techniques of business management and the ‘cult of excellence’ into public sector institutions (Ball, 1998, p. 123) and (on the other) ‘adult education enterprises connected to labour market initiatives that (actively) promote the ... usually short term (also) self-identified interests of trade and industry ... as these are represented and voiced within education committees by elected members of GBG (The Gothenburg Business Region), who are also indirect sponsors of restructuring’ (Barbara). The losers on the other hand, are the people ‘associated with a previously dominant ... humanist education ... and the students who could have chosen and benefited from its continued delivery’ (Betty).

Short-term job related skills and work related knowledge have become very much emphasised according to teacher informants, as students move in and out of their education in time with whether and how they are able to become employed within the labour market:

The connection with the labour market is very apparent. The dominant idea is that we should principally educate people so they can get work and that if they can’t or don’t get a job or qualification for a job then the
education isn’t worthwhile ... This has been imported directly into the new framework agreement for SFI where pupils [sic] become individuals who are moving into the system and who are seen as investment objects, worthy of investing in or not, as the case may be. There is an obvious conflict between this and a humanistic perspective ... It’s also visible in how we make up courses and programmes, if you can call them programmes these days ... It’s all about flex courses, workshops, individual study plans and the like ... so people can fit studying into life projects where work dominates rather than building life projects around a desire for improvement through education ... But things like flex courses ... don’t suit everyone, neither all students, nor all teachers or all situations ... Courses become very minimalist ... What is important for the moment dominates ... Learning becomes fragmented ... (Barbara; but also Ken Greta and Betty have spoken in similar terms)

The way of speaking about and organising education that informants like Barbara speak against often includes both an objectification and a distancing of the practices of education and its participants. The talk is about students as clients, customers or even consumers and education as a product. In this kind of education ‘newspeak’ individuals are treated as objects not subjects despite all the rhetoric of ‘the individual in focus’. What Brown & Lauder (1996) called neo-Fordism is strongly prevalent. Educational activities have been turned into saleable, or even corporatised, market products as part of a national efficiency drive (see also Taylor et al 1997). Good examples of the way this plays out in actual practices in Göteborg are in the meetings between the tracking organization, SPA, and the students who they place out and track at different education suppliers. The demands of getting a job on the one hand, which often for many economically poor immigrants, working class youngsters and short educated persons means any job, and the availability of short-term, short skilled labour in trade, industry and commerce on the other, now determines the space of (or perhaps for) education. Several informants spoke about the recent developments in these senses. In the example below so called ‘flex-courses’ are in focus:

The flexi form takes up a lot more time than politicians and administrators think and it is very demanding on the students as well, who usually want and prefer more direct instruction and more time together if they are given the choice, which they actually rarely are ... Flex courses are said to be in the student interests and for the students’ choices but this is a myth ... They are in the interests of the local employers ... Furthermore, the idea that these courses can work in the interests of the ‘needier groups’ as politicians have called them, is a total fallacy. These courses demand well-developed study skills and students who are able to manage and plan their own learning ... Most of our students, particularly in SFI, don’t usually have these routines and cannot know in advance how much time learning in a particular area can take and will take ... The notion is that they can get
through what they need as quickly as possible but what happens is that we pilot them through the courses and ignore the content of what they actually understand so they can fit in learning requirements as a recurrent short cycle project within an overall commitment to finding... employment... It becomes very fragmented... Learning difficulties are just passed on all the time to the next level... These are the outcomes of... flex courses... They create the problems that the proponents claim they treat...
(Ken, former Studium teacher)

What is suggested strongly above is a kind of domination of the new education situation by a new labour market perspective. However, whilst this suggested domination might be materially true, according to vast amounts of current evidence, it doesn’t have to mean that there was no ‘employment-oriented’ education in the past in public service education (see Carlén, 1999 and Carlson, 2004, for further examples and discussions on these issues). Indeed, according to Ken and several others there was. But what it does tend to mean is that this education is delivered as the rule now, in privatised education arrangements that are paid for by public money, but weren’t previously. Previously community adult education provided a ‘humanistic education for adults who wanted to progress within the education system’ (Betty) and fulfil the demands of upper-secondary qualification, whilst companies commissioned, ‘bought and paid for specialist courses or programmes of study for their employees if they needed them and could benefit from them’ (Ken):

Before, I used to do work within Komvux but there were also courses in things like basic maths for people working at Ericsson Microwave and I also had courses with Swedish Telecom, Volvo and ‘Manpower’... Companies bought the education from us... for their employees... We pushed things pretty hard... to fit their requests because the CAE economy benefited and pulled in a lot of money... that we could then use... It was a great situation... Now education in ‘flex courses’ that cater to individual needs and the labour market is what we do almost all the time... On the one hand we give a quick fix to get people into work or we are flexible and bend enough to allow them to combine work and study so that they can at least appear to get an education... There is very little else left... What companies were getting from us but paying for themselves before (that is, as described also by Carlén, 1999, an unemployment buffer, new skills training, specialist or general knowledge in particularly targeted domains), they are getting now, paid for by the tax budget... It’s clear who gains from this... (Ken)

The idea of ‘flexibility’ versus ‘fixed’ is given a new turn above, as is the idea of ‘new’ versus ‘old’. The ‘new’ education is not new at all but rather a particular adaptation of a pre-existing arrangement. Furthermore, flexibility is not flexibility as such, but more of an accommodation of education to short-term commercial needs as defined for the moment by business interests supported by a reification of the concept of these needs as also the needs of individual
(prospective) workers and education clients. We can wonder, given this reversal of consciousness, why the general popular understanding can be so easily seduced by the power of discourse as to see things in any other way. The Managing Director of Studium explains this partly by saying that ‘novelty can have its own attraction’ and that the new ideals (in this case flexibility), are stressed as not to be found within the old school form because these school forms were the antithesis of flexibility. Several of the teachers have expressed similar points. Others have contested the definition of the inflexibility of the old Komvux more directly. Ken is one of them:

The suggestions have been that what characterised the former CAE was that it was rigid and there was an idea that there would be greater flexibility in a system with several actors involved. There would be competition, new pedagogical methods and freedom of choice. And there has sort of been the idea of the beauty of newness and a sort of salvation aura as well. All periods have their trends and fancies ... The media has played on and promoted these ... What they have ignored is that there was great variety in the past and they have also ignored what the new flexi courses actually give rise to and lead to as a form of learning ... not to mention how education work is being changed in the process from a professional to a highly fragmented and almost mechanical activity ...

Popular discourses tie restructuring to ideas of renewal, refurbishment and improvement and suggest that we are living in a new free world where a whole array of human ‘goods’ such as human advancement, self-reliance, flexibility, independence and autonomy are catered for through markets and where, as well as this, money is saved in the process by tying service provision to market relations. However, the material developments from restructuring as we have felt them through the words of our informants and have measured them in terms of actual developments in the local adult education arena allow a more complex picture to develop. We would suggest that our ‘brave new world’ can be characterised in another way on the basis of these materials, where instead of the idealism of human advancement, self-reliance, flexibility, variety, freedom of choice, new spaces for the development of new skills, economic savings and so on, there are the material conditions of a new education economy where what people want and need more than anything else is a ‘stability and job security they can no longer have’ (Ronny). This security, Ronny says, is currently being preyed on by those who are interested in promoting one vision of education at the expense of others ‘through ignorance at times ... and at others for ideological, political (and) private reasons’ (Ronny).

Discussion

The most significant features of restructuring in adult education in Göteborg according to the present study are (i) a decline in public ownership of public services but an increase in public financing of private interests, (ii) an increase
in the surveillance of professionals through newly devised quality control systems, (iii) a transformation of governance through the introduction of these surveillance mechanisms and the accountability regimes associated with them and (iv) the ‘production’ of significant changes in the labour process for ‘public service professionals’. These are similar changes to those noted by Rachael Sharpe (2003) in higher education in her charge that in each capitalist country where restructuring has occurred, the revolution in education policy that has been brought about has constantly produced the same effects (also Whitty et al., 1998). These are (i) that education is increasingly provided subject to cost and profit interests, as opposed to professional judgements about good value practices and (ii) is thus becoming increasingly objectified (in the sense of developing within social relations that transform people into objects rather than subjects) and alienated (in the sense that education work has become increasingly accommodated toward a value form of labour that is characteristic for competitive, privatised production). The developments we have noted in Göteborg are summarised as follows.

- conversion of public services to private;
- business takeover of education supply;
- the introduction of quasi markets for consolidating privatisation processes;
- local authorities forming agencies for contracting out education delivery to private suppliers;
- public payment for the public supply of education in the interests of businesses replacing business payment for the supply of this education;
- increased costs of administration through monitoring outsourced delivery and because of franchise effects on public employees;
- increased privatisation of the means of education production and the promotion of the value form of labour;
- the dissemination of a view of learners as economically rational, self-interested individuals and the reconstruction of the curriculum in line with this vision;
- the increased use of terms like consumer choice;
- the increased objectification of education, the curriculum, teachers and students;
- the increased use of formalised control systems and managerialist practices.

Two dimensions of restructuring in education can be discussed in relation to the issues that are summarised above. These concern firstly the forms of opposition that are visible. There is resistance toward restructuring even if the spaces for oppositional activity are often squeezed very tightly shut and secondly the principles of formation of interests in restructuring, where political forces have channelled ideas, principles and ideologies in ways that challenge and even vilify previous (comprehensive, public) education relationships and influence the formation of education policy at both national and local levels (Dale, 1997; Brown & Lauder, 1997). The orchestra of political manipulation in ideological interests, the appropriation of media pressure, the deconstruction of bureaucracy to enable a faster and more direct form of
political control and the transformation of democracy away from forms of direct democracy and towards a notion of democracy as individual freedom of choice have been introduced through the voices of informants in the present ethnography as examples. But at the same time in the interviews a conflict of interests and roles has been expressed within the organisation of adult education and the restructuring process. Different fields of recontextualisation can be described as fields of contest (cf. Muller, 1998). Even if the story of the restructuring for most of the interviewees in many ways is ‘the same story’ with the market solution as ‘a new master narrative’ (Czarniawska, 1997; Ball, 1998) explanations and understandings in the accounts vary substantially. Blame, excuses and justifications also frequently occur to explain untoward behaviour and bridge the gap between actions and expectations (cf. Scott & Lyman, 1968).

Two groups do seem to have been affected more directly materially than others through the processes of restructuring we have researched, at least according to our provisional analysis. These are on the one hand people who need an education but have been left without one and on the other the uprooted teachers from the service sector of adult education, who have lost the possibility of working with the jobs they desire in public service employment and who no longer have the possibility to exercise real personal control over their work. Many professionals in the present situation, but of course not all, have spoken of a deflation of their professional self, of a reduction in professional freedom and on how they feel they have been forced to accept the requirements of a new-market identity ‘in the name of progress and development’ or leave the adult education sector. This forced adaptation can be described as a motor of re-culturing in adult education and concerns the application of a (kind of global) market discourse to a local education situation no matter what the public, personal, emotional and professional consequences might be for the people involved.

**Concluding Remarks**

The present article suggests that there are clear differences both within and between the discourses developed in adult education by differently positioned agents, this is always the case of course, but also consistencies. These often refer to the need for a flexible workforce in the new work order not specifically an educated one, which also seems to be what is developing in adult education in Göteborg today, where these words seem to have obtained material consequences inside interpretative, communicative and other social practices (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Bourdieu, 1996; Hall, 1996). In Göteborg a comprehensive, humanistic education for all has been replaced by an education that is described as designed in the image of ‘flexibility’ and the short term needs of trade, industry and employment in the Göteborg region. This brings us to a second point. This point is that the present dominance of market and other neoliberal solutions in public services does not (as is often advanced)
necessarily signal the supremacy of neoliberalism to other organisation forms (also McMurtry, 1998; Thorpe & Brady, 2003) but rather points to the current contradictions of government policy (a good education for all as part of a public commons) and educational change today (flexible education provision in a private interest). Education restructuring has in this sense not involved the takeover of education by corporate enterprises, as in common ‘linear’ understandings of restructuring, but of an updating of the organisation of education in relation to economic interests already prevalent in existing social practices and ways of speaking about education locally and globally.

Notes

[1] The Adult Education Initiative (Sw. Kunskapslyft) was the result of a massive economic investment in adult education in Sweden that was set up by the central government as a five-year nationwide project in 1997 for changing pedagogical frames and the organisation of instruction, increasing adult education, for using education as a buffer against unemployment and for, at the same time, also boosting official employment levels and stimulating economic growth (Government Proposition 1995/96: 222; SOU 1996: 27; SOU 1997: 158). The AEI is often implicated as significant for the way adult education was later restructured in Göteborg, even in the Gothenburg Model, which is often expressed as for instance Harry Boye in the present set of interviews ‘as a logical extension of the way the AEI was developed’.

References


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