

Successful educational settings as action nets. Case studies from individual programs at upper secondary education and basic education for adults.

Introduction

“What goes on in successful educational settings, in programs that otherwise often have high drop-out rates?” That is the fundamental question in our four year project (2009-2012) *Successful Educational Settings as Action Nets*, funded by the Swedish Research Council. Our field of study centers on is two specific programs that Swedish municipalities are obliged to provide: the so-called Individual Program (IV – a form of alternative upper secondary education) and basic education for adults. In this paper we mainly focus on the IV (the Individual Program).

We begin our paper with the purport of ‘successful’. We then provide descriptive data of the IV after which we put forward the theoretical framework of *action nets* – a concept tailored for organization studies (Czarniawska 1997; Lindberg & Czarniawska 2006) and we discuss the methodology that comes with this framework. In the second part of the paper we describe the work with our project to date – during our first year of four – and reflect on some distinctive features that we have found striking during our field studies so far.

The question of successful

Swedish upper secondary education consists of 17 programs, and the IV. A major part of the IV serves pupils lacking eligibility requirements for a program. In 2008, 8%¹ of the pupils of Swedish upper secondary education were enrolled in the IV (Skolverket, 2009). The IV has more interruptions, higher drop-out rates and lower throughput than other programs in secondary education. It has often been criticized by politicians and in leading articles in the media. In an interview often referred to from March 2008², the Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, called the IV “the most unsuccessful contribution of all in the Swedish educational system”. Swedish secondary education is facing a major restructuring in the coming years, with the intention to raise results with throughput. This restructuring very much concerns the IV.

For us in our project, successful is a broader issue than test outcomes and throughput such as grades. The successful educational settings in our project are selected on the basis that they are settings where many students pursue their studies. They are also settings that students in evaluations have showed that they value: they like them and they learn there. They are also settings that others have spoken highly of, e.g. key persons in the municipal organization or other educators in the field. On this basis, our research approach involves educational key processes and successful student experiences. We find support from different educational researchers (Floden 2001, Gustafsson 2006, Resnick 2007, McLaughlin & Talbert 2001). We also find support in transnational and national policy: The OECD argues that “recognition should be given to the multiple objectives of education, rather than concentrating only on economic or instrumentalist goals” (2005, p. 12). The Swedish curriculum Lpf 94 makes a strong point that “The school shall actively and consciously influence and stimulate pupils

¹ Total amount of students in upper secondary education was 396 000.

² Dagens eko, 2008-03-28

into embracing the common values of our society and to encourage the expression of these in practical daily action"... This is further made specific in the following words that are in line with article 29 of the UN convention of the rights of the child³:

The school shall strive to ensure that all pupils further develop their ability to consciously adopt ethical standpoints based on knowledge and personal experience, respect the intrinsic value and integrity of other people, work against people being exposed to oppression and abusive treatment and are a source of help for other people, understand and respect other people and cultures, can empathise with and understand the situation other people are in and also develop the will to act with their best interests at heart, and show respect and care for the immediate environment as well as for the environment in a wider perspective.

Our interest is wide and our study an "inquiry" in a deweyan sense: we want to investigate what goes on in a handful of educational settings that are regarded as successful. Our point of departure is influenced by John Dewey's thoughts as presented in *Democracy and education* (1916). Dewey's core ideas "that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end"; and that "the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming" (cf. Chapter 4) opens up for a broad analysis of organizing and pedagogical key processes. We mean that it is most important to closely study and acquire knowledge about organizational and pedagogical key processes in such educational settings. We have found no Swedish research studies focusing on organization (organizing) and pedagogy of so-considered 'promising' or 'best practices' concerning the Individual program or Basic Adult Education. Questions that can be asked are: What's the administration? How are they organized – how do they organize? What are constraints – and how do they get around them? What can be distinguished by the interactions of teachers and students? What learning are the students involved in? In what way, and by what means?

At a first glance, this study with its interest in 'successful' (or 'promising' and 'best practice') might be regarded as having aspirations to be within the evidence-based movement, as e.g. presented by Robert E. Slavin at the ECER conference in Ghent 2007 (Slavin 2008). However, we do not match such requirements of establishing effective replicable programs for different practices. On the contrary, we agree with David Bridges, who in his reply to Slavin (Bridges 2008) emphasizes the local, contextual knowledge and understanding, and proposes case studies or 'thick descriptions' in order to understand educational practice.

So, like most researchers, we believe that taking part in the analysis of the organizing of other practices and learning how others do is very important and useful. That is a core criteria e.g. when applying for funding: that the outcomes of the research shall be useful and contribute to enhancing the quality of education policy and educational practice. We believe that it is important to publish the results and the analyses of the studies for a wide range of readers within the educational field, and to engage in a discussion of our results and analysis. We agree with Gert Biesta's critique on evidence-based education (Biesta, 2007) and appreciate his analysis of Dewey's theory of knowledge, of the process of knowing and inquiry and of problem-solving as a counterpart in relation to ideas of effective evidence-based education. Biesta's Dewey-inspired conclusion of the role of research for the improvement of action and practice is shown in the following line of argument:

... we do not use "old" knowledge to tell us what we should do; we use "old" knowledge to guide us first in our attempts to understand what the problem might be and then in the intelligent selection of

³ Cf. also Gustafsson, 2006, p. 40.

possible lines of action. What "old" knowledge does, in other words, is help us approach problem solving more intelligently.

Our contribution to successful educational settings is about organizing. We believe that it is of great importance to focus on and to understand the organizing processes in educational settings and their context. We regard our research into successful educational settings not as a study of 'what works', but of 'how works'. The focus on how – on organizing – is inspired by Karl Weick's theory of organizing (1979) and of sensemaking in organizations, which we initially learned about through the works of Barbara Czarniawska (see e.g. Czarniawska 2008). We find Weick and Dewey as being on the same epistemological ground, Weick's claim that one must study the process of organizing and Dewey's ideas of the educational process as one of "continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming" are very similar. In the article mentioned above, Biesta summarizes the possibilities of research in the following: "Research cannot supply us with rules of action ... but with hypothesis for intelligent problem solving" (Biesta, p. 20). In other words as we see it, studies of organizing of and in (successful) educational settings can provide a hypothesis for intelligent problem solving.

In the application for this ECER conference, one was expected to draft "Expected outcomes". The expected outcomes of our study are closely intertwined with the theoretical frameworks and the overall question "What goes on in successful educational settings, in programs that otherwise often have high drop-out rates?" Conclusions of findings will be drawn from the following questions:

What are the narratives of the 'success' of the setting, as shaped and put forth by the students, teachers and other staff?

What objects – things, technologies – and procedures are shown to be structuring resources, and durable connections in the organizing of the setting?

How – through what means – are educational aims translated into methods that cooperate with the activities of the students?

We will describe the theoretical framework more closely and we will return to our research questions at the end of the paper. First we want to provide descriptive data and give a picture of the field of the IV.

The Individual program: history, function, descriptive data and context

In Sweden, attendance at school is compulsory for all children aged 7-16. Compulsory school lasts for 9 years. After that, everybody is entitled to upper secondary school, until the age of 20. In the academic year of 2008/2009 there were 396 000 pupils in upper secondary school. Since 1993, upper secondary school has offered 17 national programs, each lasting for 3 years, and the IV. The national programs consist of a base called the core subjects, and mandatory courses, optional courses, individual choices, and project work. Initially, the IV was a complementary alternative for pupils who for some reason did not follow a national program.

At the time of the introduction of the IV in 1993, there were no specific eligibility requirements for the national programs: students were enrolled on the basis of their grade point average and the amount of places the school provided for the program. A reform in 1998 stated that at least the grade Pass in three subjects, Swedish/Swedish as a second language, English, and Mathematics, is required to be eligible for a national program⁴ at upper

⁴ There is also an arrangement called "specially designed program". This is equal to a national program but more flexible in structure.

secondary school. Since 1998, the IV has been the option for pupils lacking these eligibility requirements. Following the introduction of the eligibility rules in 1998 the proportion rose from 5–6 percent to 8–9 percent attending the IV.

The Education act (Chapter 5, section 4b) defines the Individual program as follows:

An individual programme shall primarily prepare the pupil for studies in a national programme or a specially designed programme.

An individual programme may

1. be specially directed at studies in a national programme or a specially designed programme (programme-directed individual programme),
2. make it possible for young persons through apprenticeships to combine employment aimed at vocational training with studies in certain subjects in Upper Secondary School, and
3. satisfy special educational needs of the pupil's.

An individual programme with the objective referred to in the first paragraph may be designed for a group of pupils. A programme-directed individual programme shall be designed for a group of pupils. The education in an individual programme shall follow a plan, which shall be determined by the local education board. As regards individual programmes referred to in the second paragraph 2, the Government may order that the education in the school shall include at least certain of the subjects. (1999:887).

In accordance with this, the IV caters for different groups and purposes. For instance, the IV is the place for students not yet eligible for a national program. But on the contrary, it can also be the place for pupils that have dropped out of a national program, unsure of what to do next, not ready for re-entering a national program, or waiting for a place in a national program. 36 percent of the pupils who started the first year of the IV in 2007, went on to follow another program the following year (Skolverket, 2009). Drop-out rates are high compared to the national programs. Counting all programs (including individual programs and specially designed programs) 7.3 % interrupted/ postponed their studies. The number of interruptions/postponements of pupils in the IV was considerably higher: 27.9 %.

The IV is not one program, but a myriad of educational arrangements and local 'packages' serving different needs. These packages vary in length, and they also vary in content. One model is IVIK, an immigrant introduction program for secondary school pupils who have newly arrived in Sweden. In 2008, 16% of the students in the IV joined IVIK. Such a program is often individualized and the time spent there can vary from some months to more than a year.

In the last ten years, program-directed individual programs (PRIV), have become frequent, a concept promoted by The Swedish National Agency for Education. In the last two years, almost a fourth of all pupils at the IV have been enrolled as PRIV pupils. Program studies in PRIV means that you take your supplementary grades from compulsory school, as a part of your studies in the national program. This is most often arranged as special PRIV groups during year one of upper secondary school. However, there are also inclusive versions where pupils who lack only one of the three pass grades attend a regular national program, and do additional complementary studies in that specific subject.

The 'ordinary' IV consists of most heterogeneous groups and study arrangements. There are study groups for dyslectic pupils, groups for pupils with cognitive disabilities⁵, groups for

⁵ 7 800 students attend secondary education of the school form 'Education for pupils with learning disabilities'. This is a specific school form, and under a different part of the education act (Chapter 6, section 1). There are

pupils with specific social needs, groups for pupils with behavioral challenges, groups for pupils who are tired of school, for pupils who don't know what program to join, groups or individual arrangements for pupils doing apprenticeships and part-time vocational training, groups or individual arrangements for pupils who are or have been ill or depressed.

In some municipalities, the IV is integrated in the municipal upper secondary school building. In some, the IV and its groups will be in an adjacent building, or in an attic or basement. In some larger cities, one can find IV units with many different classes, groups and individual arrangements.

One in three pupils in the IV has a foreign background (Skolverket 2006, p. 64). In bigger cities, these numbers will be considerably higher. Pupils in this category may have lived in Sweden for some years, or were born in Sweden with at least one parent not born in Sweden. 57% of the total amount of the pupils in the IV are boys. Within PRIV, the numbers between boys and girls are more equal, with boys accounting for 52% in the IV.

A pupil in the Individual program will most likely attend a school run by the municipality. Only 2% of the pupils in the IV attend an independent school. Otherwise Sweden has had a great increase of the proportion of students in independent schools. In the larger cities the proportion will be as high as 50%, but independent school pupils in the IV will still be few. Thus one can state that there are structural divides between students in the individual program and national programs.⁶

Among politicians and in media, the IV is often talked about as a failure. The number of students attending the program (8% of all secondary school students), the high drop-out rates (27.9 %, compared to the overall number of 7.3 %) and the fact that in the end less than a fourth of those who enter the IV will in the end have made his or her way through a national program – such facts are made evident. The IV – as the rest of the Swedish secondary education system – is the coming years facing fundamental reformation. May 15th 2009, the Ministry of Education presented a bill: “Higher demands and quality in the new upper secondary school”. However, after all the critique of the IV, the details of the new individual program were not in the bill. It was stated that this field was problematic and needed further investigation.

A supplement for the IV is thought to be available in October 2009. The eligibility requirements are subject to change in the new upper secondary school. From 2011, pupils attending vocational programs need the grade pass in at least eight subjects, including Swedish/Swedish as a second language, mathematics and English, and the grade pass in at least 12 subjects if attending a higher education preparatory program.

One of the issues, presented by the investigator in the official report, is to which extent the pupils of the new individual program can be transferred to be the responsibility of compulsory school, and do a ‘preparatory year’ before entering upper secondary school. The reasoning is that the outcomes of compulsory school shall be a matter for that school form to manage, and not a problem for the upper secondary school. The bill also includes proposals of restriction to change tracks and to reduce the number of individual choices. Here the idea is that students

pupils, that have the right to be in ‘Education for pupils with learning disabilities’ but instead participate in the individual program of secondary school.

⁶ In the period 1995/96 hardly 2 percent of all upper secondary school pupils were enrolled in an independent school, but in the period 2005/06 the corresponding proportion was more than 13 percent. (Skolverket, 2006)

and parents must be provided with better knowledge of the frames and requirements in order to achieve a pass grade in all upper secondary courses.

Studying Organizing in Action Nets

As shown above, activities in the IV serve various purposes and take different forms. That is why our basis – or unit of analysis – is ‘educational settings’. An educational setting can be regarded as an activity serving a group of students, with a number of staff involved. Our use of the concept implies an interest in studying the organizing and the place and space of such settings. What goes on? What kind of learning are they involved in? Why and how do they value what they are involved in? What structuring resources, techniques and interactions make them stay? Questions such as these are very much borne in mind.

Our interest in knowing *what goes on* in the educational settings which we study is really about wanting to study, analyze and discuss the everyday practice of organizing. The point of departure for analysis of action nets is action, and the connections of actions.⁷ Lindberg and Czarniawska formulate the purpose of the concept in these words: “The purpose of adopting the action net concept is to free the researcher from the limitations involved in the traditional focus on places, people, or issues [Czarniawska, 2004]. Actions may vary, people may change, and issues can be defined differently by different sense-makers.” (2006, p. 295). Thus, our aim is to study what kind of actions are established and re-established in, and in relation to, the educational settings in our study, and how – by what means – certain actions are connected. In what way do the actions connect and in what way do they constitute an action net? In accordance with this theory of organizing (Czarniawska 2008) we understand organizing as a continuous process of connecting of actions. Thus, we do not regard the ‘success’ to be found at some certain level, some certain entity or caused by some specific factors. Instead the focus of our analysis is how the ‘success’ is produced, performed, stabilized in terms of connections among actions. Or how, for that matter, by what means the ‘success’ is de-stabilized.

Two concepts that are important in our analysis of organizing (and of the connections when organizing) which we will use in the latter part of this paper are *loose couplings* and *translation*. The core of the idea of loose coupling as elaborated on by Weick (1976) and Orton & Weick (1990) is that in a system, like an organization, elements are linked simultaneously as loose and coupled.⁸ There is a dialectical relation with both distinctiveness and responsiveness. The concept of loose couplings has been used by e.g. Meyer and Rowan (1977) when studying schools. The concept is very useful when studying organizing in a decentralized system, since it combines the contradictory concepts of connection *and* autonomy. The educational settings in our studies have shown to be strikingly loosely coupled subunits in some kind of larger unit of the educational public sector. There are many elements of both tight couplings – strong structural connections that lay down conditions for action – and loose autonomy that enable action which stabilizes the activity.

⁷ For a thorough discussion on the concept of action nets, its origin, and in which ways it differs to other similar concepts such as network, organizational field and actor-network see Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006, pp. 293-296, and Czarniawska 2008, pp. 18-23). Differences can be said to be about ‘what comes first’. Regarding an action net: actions (and the connecting of these) come before actors/actants. Actions, when repeated, when stabilized, when institutionalized, construct action patterns and identities of actors.

⁸ They put forth four different relations: a system can be noncoupled – i.e. there is neither responsiveness nor distinctiveness. A system with responsiveness without distinctiveness is a tightly coupled system. If there is distinctiveness without responsiveness, the system is decoupled. If there is both distinctiveness and responsiveness, the system is loosely coupled.

The concept of translation is also about connections, or connecting. Translation has been called “the mechanism whereby connecting is achieved” (Lindberg & Czarniawska 2006, p 295). Thus, translation is a broader feature than linguistic translation:

This notion of translation not only applies to linguistic translations—from the language of planners into the language of the users and the language of financiers; it applies also to objects, images and actions. This means that words can be translated into objects or into actions. But translation can also work the other way round; actions and objects can be translated into words: it applies also to objects, images and actions.

Lindberg & Czarniawska 2006, p 295

When identifying the actions and the connections in the action net of the respective educational setting, we have been involved in the process of studying how words are translated to objects (such as a plan, a proposal, an account, a document) that connect different actions, and the other way around. In the latter part of this paper, we will present some translation processes that we have found to be prominent in our studies.

Our study of interest and the epistemological framework of our inquiry implies fieldwork with multiple ethnographic techniques. Apart from traditional ethnographic approaches participating over an extended period of time (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) – i.e. watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – we follow the suggestions from Czarniawska (2007) on how to study organizing through the help of more mobile ethnography. This implies techniques such as shadowing, diary studies, photograph reports and following objects. We also see that the usage of 'modern' techniques and visual ethnography as shown by Pink (2007) is beneficial when studying settings with young people. Young people are often comfortable with these techniques, and visual approaches are possibilities of involving them in the narration of what goes on, and of sensemaking (cf. Weick 1995). This is not only a question of photographic captions by the students in our study, but also a possibility of combining visual and written material by the students.

The educational settings

Our project involves two educational settings in Basic Adult Education and five educational settings at the IV. Five are in a large city, two are in smaller municipalities. Some of the settings of the IV in the large city belong to the same administrative unit, and some are in the same building. In the large city, we have chosen settings with different profiles, serving different groups. A program-directed individual program, an immigrant introduction program, a package for students with learning disabilities, a setting in which vocational training and school days are mixed, and a so-called 'regular' IV setting for students aspiring to enter a national program.

In the small municipality, we regard the IV as one setting. Several teachers are involved in more than one of the study groups, and the teachers regard themselves as one big team. There are activities that different groups do together. Currently there are 80 students altogether, and there are five different kinds of study groups: a group on the immigrant introduction program, a preparatory group with studies five days a week, a program-directed individual program, vocational training and mixed studies and a small group for pupils who need much social support.

The project so far

The project started in January 2009. With regard to our application to the Research Council in 2008, we had established contact with four of the settings, presented in the research proposal. We had interviewed staff, taken part of documents of the activities and collected data on students. From January we have established contact with the other settings, and have begun initial field studies in the settings. During spring, we have sat in on teacher team meetings and on unit meetings, we have taken part in activities, identifying actions, actors, and had the ambition to sketch a first picture of the wider action net of the specific educational setting. We have conducted interviews with different actors we have identified as important in the respective action net. We have also participated in class and other student activities, have eaten in the canteen, have been on outings, visited students undergoing vocational training, have participated in class assessment meetings with the director of studies, participated in information meetings for next year's students and have interviewed students leaving some of the settings at the end of spring. The latter part of spring involved taking part in the admission process for the coming academic school year.

In August and early September, i.e. at the start of the academic school year of 2009-2010, we have followed the process of planning in several of the teams, following the process of constituting student groups, and participating in some of the starts with the students. We have also had discussions on methodology with some of the teachers in the different settings, in order to later involve the students in the narration of what goes on. Current ideas are photo reports and film.

Three distinctive features

In this final part of the paper we present three distinctive features that we have been struck by during our very first period of fieldwork, and regard as of great import for the organizing and stabilization of the action net.

The first feature comes from our studies of the interaction of teachers and students and concerns the pedagogical thoughtfulness of the teachers. We have taken part in many complex situations where students have shown frustration, a lack of concentration, expressed discouragement, anger and irritation in many ways. Sometimes these situations have involved frustration with learning difficulties concerning the task at hand, but very often the issue has been much broader. We have been struck by how the teachers deal with outspokenness and frustration, how they work with their tone of voice, gestures and glances, and keep calm. When asked about this strategy they give answers like: "There is no sense in me scolding. If I want to get through to X or Y, and make him/her want to be here and feel ok, work with the subjects and learn, I have to take a long-term view." Or "We stay calm. They calm down. They know we help them to sort things out. We invest much time in talking to them personally, and our social officer is involved. After a while of commotion, they calm down. We help them and they know that". This is also acknowledged by the students we have talked with and interviewed. The students claim that they get help with their studies and that the teachers understand them. They will say things like: "The teachers here have a totally different attitude than teachers I've had before". Or "The teachers here don't yell and get angry... They help you and they understand ... They teach so you understand".

As a part of this approach, we have seen much encouragement. The teachers motivate the students, back them up, pep them, and praise them when they have worked with their tasks. We have also seen that when the teachers lecture or go through an item, it will not take longer

than 10 minutes. Classes are often organized in different phases, and the tasks alternate. "First we will do this for 10 minutes. Then we will do an exercise.... And in the end, we will take a look at xxx".

Without providing more descriptive data here, we see this as a social connection contributing to the stability of the settings that we have studied. The procedure of establishing relationships with the students is long-term and appears as a linchpin for the durable connections. We will study this process more closely, as well as the set-up for lessons and the way in which the teachers work with asking questions when lecturing and how text talks are structured (factual questions, check-knowledge questions and so-called inference questions). Our research question concerning educational aims and methods that cooperate with the activities of the students is also focused here.

The second feature that we see as of great import for the durable connection of the action net and the prevention of students not participating, is the work before and during admission to the academic school year. We have taken part in ample routines between the vocational guidance officers at compulsory school and the vocational guidance officers who are part of the wider action net at secondary school, along with the teachers in the settings. Much time is spent on investigating and finding the best alternative for the individual student. In some of the settings that we have studied, students are interviewed by the teachers before it is confirmed that this is the best option for his or her studies within the individual program.

We have understood that the routines of the admissions process are considered very valuable by the teachers involved: this is expressed as a foundation for the work with the individual student later on. We have looked at different ways of exploring this notion but everything appears to point to the idea that extensive preparatory work before and at admission is a necessity for a stable launch without unneeded worries in the student group. We will study these processes more closely, and try to capture how this is done in different contexts (big city administration – small municipality).

The last feature deals with the concept of loosely coupled systems introduced earlier in the text. All these successful educational settings are part of a larger system in the municipal context. This means that decisions are taken somewhere else concerning budget, rents, material resources, move of premises, thus the settings are dependent or determined by decisions in the wider action net. When we applied for our research project, we were prepared to study activities during change, since the span of our project extends over years of reformation of secondary education. However, from the first day of fieldwork we have been informed about cuts, proposals and ideas of change related to economical issues and increased efficiency. We have in more than one or two cases seen how the staff in the settings have to account for the costs of the settings and the students – e.g. being asked to submit a report on the students, their diagnosis and their individual needs. These processes we see as translation processes – words about students are translated into categories and numbers that are supposed to legitimize the needs and the costs of the setting.

Although dependent, the settings are at the same time autonomous: "The show goes on" even though the ground and the walls are questioned and instable. This persistence is based on the daily activities – and the daily needs of the students. We have encountered dry coarse comments, silence and indifference concerning decision making in other parts of the municipality. We heard comments such as: "I've been around 20 years. I know how they move around and change the organization and ask us what we actually do. That's the way it

is. Meanwhile we just keep on working with things we have to do right here with the students." The impact of the change appears in many ways neutralized.

However, the coming restructuring of the Individual program implies major interference, since the idea is that it shall not be a part of the secondary school system in the way that it has been. How this major re-organizing process will turn out will be the part of our coming research studies. Until now, we have been struck by the autonomous characteristics that stand out as fundamental for the everyday activities of the settings that we study.

Summing up

In the abstract proposal for this ECER conference, one was asked to outline projected conclusions, outcomes or findings. Conclusions that we draw now in the very beginning of the project is that our theoretical and methodological approach is appropriate when studying complexities of educational settings, and that such local complexities very much need to be studied. The context is national and local educational-political incentives and decisions, labour market policy, regional policies of youth and inclusion, and municipal economics. We will take part in de-stabilizing processes and stabilizing connections during the restructuring of Swedish secondary education. The action nets of the successful educational settings are processes of continuous re-organizing and re-establishment, and we will study how this functions.

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