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Johanna Mufic
johanna.mufic@liu.se

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Quality in Canadian and Swedish Adult Education Policy

Johanna Mufic

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to compare and critically scrutinize how quality is construed in Canadian and Swedish adult education policy. The empirical data consists of policy documents and interviews conducted with adult educators.

Keywords: Adult Education, Canada, Comparative study, Sweden, Quality

In both transnational and national policy, much focus seems to be on how “quality” can be obtained and maintained (Dahler-Larsen, 2019; deleted for anonymity). Subsequently, quality is steadily becoming a more and more important issue in education systems around the world. This search or chase for quality is also present in schools that now seem to be expected to provide it and be accountable for it. Hence, schools in many countries that previously were tasked to bring education and democracy, may now be tasked with delivering quality (Bergh, 2010; Dahler-Larsen, 2019). But even though quality replaces many other concepts in an apparently unproblematic way, it has been criticized in previous research for being, vague and elusive (Bergh, 2010; Bornemark, 2018; Dahler-Larsen, 2019).

In transnational policy, the concept of quality seems to be left undefined even though the need for more and increasing quality is stressed (OECD, 2018, 2019; World Bank, 2018). But instead of defining it, most of the attention in policy seems to be directed to how to solve “quality problems”. Put differently, quality seems to be construed as a ‘lack’ or a ‘deficiency’ in adult education policy (deleted for anonymity; Ministry of Education, 2019:06, 2018:71). According to Dahler-Larsen (2019) the way that issues can be addressed like “quality issues” in policy or practice is closely linked to governing. Moreover, it becomes difficult to question or object to the increased quality focus, as the concept has attained the status of the common good (Cottle & Alexander, 2012; Hunkin, 2019; Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm, & Simola, 2011; Rudoe, 2020).

And even though the need for more quality is stressed in policy, it has been argued that the search and chase for it has increased practitioners’ administrative burden (Bornemark, 2018; Lindgren, 2014). Especially much of the focus on quality seems to be measure- and audit-oriented. Such situations beg the question of what is done in the name of quality and how these actions affect people that are involved in these systems? As previously mentioned, the concept of quality is not neutral, and it has different kinds of effects that we need to know more about (Bergh, 2010; Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011). Additionally, it becomes relevant to compare how different countries address these quality issues in their adult education systems. By drawing on policy documents and data from interviews with principals, teachers and other persons that are involved in adult education in Canada and Sweden, it is possible to both compare and scrutinize how quality is construed.

Adult education in Canada and Sweden

According to Selman, Selman, Cooke and Dampier (1998) adult education takes the shape of the society it is a part of. This means that it can have a very different purpose and organization depending on the country’s steering system. Among others, the aim of adult education around the world could be to educate more expert practitioners, productive workers, or informed citizens. When it comes to Canada and Sweden, the two countries are often described as similar, especially when it comes to education, as Swedish politicians have been inspired by the way education is organized in Canada. Both countries have received a large

number of immigrants, and in effect, adult education has focused on language and citizenship education. Another thing that both countries have in common is that the responsibility and economic pre-requisites have been unequal from region to region (in Canada) and from municipal to municipal (in Sweden) (Selman et al., 1998; deleted for anonymity).

But Canada and Sweden also differ from each other in some respects as Sweden stands out as one of the most marketized systems in the world (Fejes, Runesdotter & Wärvik (2016). Moreover, the adult education systems are also differently organized. In Sweden, it is the municipality that is responsible for organizing Municipal Adult Education (MAE), while in Canada, it is the federal state that has the overall responsibility. Both countries have in common that there are no (or very few) centrally prescribed regulations or guidelines on how adult education should be organized. Because of the heterogeneity and low degree of standardization in how adult education is organized in both countries, a comparative approach could shed light, both on norms and local practices.

Theoretical Considerations

To scrutinize how quality is construed in adult education, this study draws on Bacchi's (2009) post structural, Foucault influences 'What's the "problem" represented to be?' (WPR) approach. The focus of this approach is how problems are 'represented' in policy as a way to analyze how governing takes place (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). The WPR approach is underpinned by three key propositions. First, that 'we are governed through problematizations' (Bacchi, 2009, p. xxi). This means that the aim is to understand '...the ways in which "problems" are produced and represented [...] in governmental policies and practices.' (Bacchi 2015, p. 1) rather than focusing on how policy actors understand a "problem".

Second, 'we need to study problematizations through analyzing the problem representation they contain rather than "problems"' (Bacchi, 2009, p. xxi). ... Put differently, governing is understood as a problematizing activity (Rose and Miller 1992), as Bacchi (2009, p. 31) suggests that '...we are governed *through problematizations* rather than through policy'. In this way, both governments and policies are seen as creative as they construe 'problems' as specific kinds of 'problems' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Third and finally, we need to 'problematize the problematization through scrutinizing the premises and effects of the problem representation they contain' (Bacchi, 2009, p. xxi). In other words, a lot of simplifications are usually made when a specific issue is construed as a 'problem' in policies. Consequently, it becomes important to scrutinize and interrogate such simplifications in policy to challenge problem representations as they can have both intended and unintended effects.

In order to identify, interrogate and reconstruct such problem representations, the WPR approach introduces six questions (Bacchi, 2009). In this study, three of these questions have been selected to shed light on how quality is construed in Canadian and Swedish policy proposals. The first question is: 'What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem"?' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 20). The goal of this question is to identify the discourses that need to be in place for a "problem" to be produced as a particular "problem". Moreover, it examines how a specific "problem" is represented by focusing on binaries such as 'lack of quality'/'good quality' and key concepts such as 'health' and 'quality as they may indicate a specific logic or way of thinking. Once these logics are identified, it becomes possible to interrogate and reconstruct them in order to open up space for unexamined ways of thinking.

The second question is: 'What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be conceptualized differently?' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 20). The goal of this question is to interrogate policy "problems" by focusing

on what seems to be left out in the problem representation. One way to engage with this question is to compare problem representations cross-culturally as ‘such comparisons help to identify the particular combination of practices and relations that give a “problem” a certain shape in a specific context, and that indicates that different practice can produce contrasting problematizations’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 22-23).

The third and final question is: ‘What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the problem?’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 20). This question targets intended, and sometimes unintended effects of problem representations in policy proposals. Discursive effects shed light on what becomes possible to say and think in relation to how a specific “problem” is construed. Subjectification effects targets how subjects are produced as specific kinds of subjects in relation to problem representations. Lived effects direct attention to how the way that “problem” plays out in people's lives. As such, the question ‘makes it possible to reflect on the complex array of implications that problematizations entail in certain contexts and to promote interventions that aim to reduce deleterious consequences for specific groups of people’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 23). Altogether, the aim of the questions is to identify, interrogate and reconstruct problem representations in policy proposals to open up a space for thinking about issues differently.

Within the WPR approach, a policy proposal is not only limited to written policy (Bacchi, 2009). Instead, a policy proposal could be anything that entails a call for change, such as a political debate, sayings during an interview, posters and so on. In this specific study, the selected policy proposals consist of policy documents and interviews with adult educators and school leaders in both Canada and Sweden.

Methodological Considerations

The empirical data collection has been divided into two different steps that now will be described in more detail. The first step was to collect data in Sweden in 2018-2019. This data collection process involved 20 interviews with persons involved in Swedish Municipal Adult Education (MAE). In addition, Swedish adult education policy documents that focused on quality were collected.

The second step is still proceeding and involves data collection in the form of interviews in British Columbia in 2022-2023. The interviewees will be 15-20 persons (teachers, administrators and other persons that were working with adult education) in Canadian adult education centers and community colleges (educational organizations that are comparable with MAE schools in Sweden) when it comes to funding, type of education and source of legitimacy. The persons that were being interviewed can be seen as experts as they are professionals that are working with adult education (Kvale, 1996).

The interview guide was semi-structured, and the interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour and focused on quality assurance from the perspectives of administrators, teachers and other persons involved in adult education. The audio records were transcribed and analyzed in NVivo by drawing on Carol Bacchi's (2009) post-structural theoretical framework “What's the problem represented to be? (WPR). Altogether, the collected empirical material in both countries made it possible to both compare and analyze how the different countries engage with educational quality as well as its effects.

Preliminary findings

The aim of this study has been to scrutinize how quality is construed in Canadian and Swedish adult education policy by drawing on policy documents and interviews with adult educators and school leaders. The preliminary analysis indicates that quality seems to be introduced as a way to reach societal goals in Canadian adult education policy:

By addressing the learning needs of those at risk of economic and social marginalization, the structure and quality of Canada's adult learning system, coupled with the degree to which Canadian adults access formal learning opportunities, will influence the extent to which Canada is able to meet a broad range of economic, social and cultural goals. (Statistics Canada Regional Reference Centre, 2001, p. 6)

Moreover, the concept of quality seems to be introduced as a solution to the "problem" that not many adults in Canada engage in adult education 'as much as do people in some other advanced countries' (Ibid, p. 6). More specifically, 'low-skilled adults and people with relatively little initial education have a lower probability of participating in adult education or training' compared to adults with 'good initial education' and well-developed skills (Ibid, p. 54). In this context, it is inequalities that are construed as the "problem".

The suggested "solution" seems to be to reduce inequality to engage more adults in education and by that, also in working life. In the policy document, it is suggested that more than just economic factors should be evaluated in order to address the level of adult education in Canada. Here, key concepts such as 'better health' and 'outcomes for family, community and Country' (Ibid, p. 55) are mentioned as such factors. In a more recent report, it is pointed out that adult education is not taken as seriously as the rest of the educational system (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2022). Consequently, it is argued that it has been underfunded over time and that more investment drastically will reduce poverty. The policy proposal also points out some 'major problems' (p. 3) in adult education, such as the system being fragmented and disjointed, teacher inequalities and a 'huge unmet demand' (p. 10).

When compared to Swedish adult education policies, some of the "problems" seem to be construed the same way, such as the adult education system being underfunded and unequal. Moreover, the same barriers to participation in adult education are mentioned. However, the target group seems to be described differently. In Sweden, it is construed as a 'heterogenous target group' (Ministry of Education. 2018:71; Ministry of Education. 2019:06) and in Canada it is construed as 'low-skilled' group. In Sweden, the focus in policy seems to be on the adult learners' social, ethnical, and economical background, while in Canada the focus seems to be on the adult learners' prior work and educational experiences.

In both countries, much of the attention seems to be directed to how to remove barriers for the target group in order to get them to participate in adult education. Another thing that policy proposals in both countries seem to have in common is that the different pre-requisites for organizing adult education are pointed out as a "problem". In Sweden, the focus is on how the municipalities differ in terms of size, geographical location, funding, and organization (deleted for anonymity). In Canada, the focus seems to be on regional as well as economic differences. In Sweden, the "solution" to the varied pre-requisites seems to be an increased focus on auditing activities in adult education (deleted for anonymity). In Canada, the "solution" seems to be to acknowledge the importance of the adult education system and invest more money in it (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2022, p. 39) as the 'benefits would far outweigh the costs'. Hence, there seems to be a different focus on the "solutions" even though both of them concern more investments. In Sweden, the focus seems to be to invest more in auditing and evaluating authorities and activities. In Canada, the focus seems to be to invest more in the adult education system itself. More data need to be collected and analyzed in order to generate a more detailed and encompassing analysis of how quality is construed in adult education in both countries.

Contribution

To sum it up, this study aimed to compare and scrutinize how quality is construed in adult education in Sweden and Canada. The empirical material consisted of policy documents and interviews with experts that work with adult education in both countries. Thus, this study has generated new knowledge sought by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners about the quality of adult education. And when the data collection is finished, a more thorough analysis will be conducted that consists of both policy and interviews in both Canada and Sweden.

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