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# AGENTS IN THE CLASSROOM?

An ethnographic study of teachers' and students' perceived challenges and employed strategies in the Swedish for immigrants education.

**Dimitrios Papadopoulos**

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# Abstract

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- Syfte:** The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of students' and teachers' perceived challenges resulting from the implementation of policy in the naturalistic framework of an SFI (Swedish for immigrants) classroom. Furthermore, the study aims at identifying strategies employed by students and teachers in order to overcome the perceived challenging conditions.
- Teori:** Concepts from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in relation to second language acquisition are used. In addition critical approaches to second language learning and insights from intercultural education are employed to facilitate the interpretation of the findings.
- Metod:** An ethnographic approach is adopted for the creation of data, consisting of participant observation field notes and interview transcripts.
- Resultat:** With regard to the perceived challenges, the interpretation of the findings has identified three categories which account for problematic instances resulting from the implementation of policy: The enrollment and placement process, contradicting demands between the curriculum and the municipal policy, and dealing with diversity. It is argued that the informants experience feelings of helplessness and loss of control over their own situation. Concerning the strategies employed in order to overcome the perceived challenges, it is argued that students and teachers engage in activities which promote the exertion of agency and help them to regain control. The study concludes that although the particular education is implemented within a strict policy framework, instances which allow the exertion of agency are at the disposal of the participants. Nevertheless, more systematic approaches are necessary to facilitate the realization of such initiatives.

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## Abbreviations

AEI	adult education initiative
AT	activity theory
L1	first language
L2	second language
MAE	municipal adult education
SCT	sociocultural theory
SFI	Swedish for immigrants
SLA	second language acquisition
ZPD	zone of proximal development

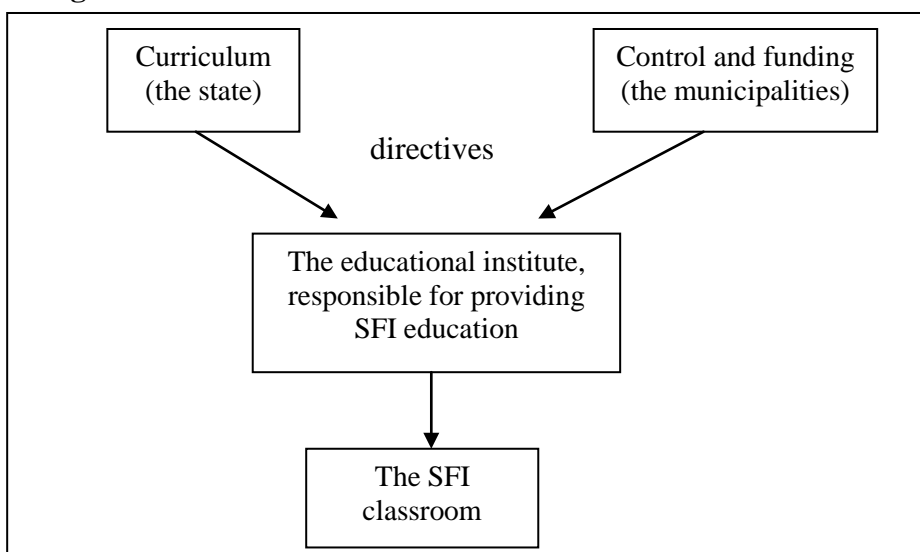
# 1. Introduction

## Background

Swedish for immigrants (SFI) is a voluntary program offering free tuition to immigrants above the age of sixteen who wish to learn the Swedish language (Skolverket, 2012b). Since its beginning, in the 1960's, it has gone through various stages of development. Currently the responsibility for providing SFI education lies upon the municipalities, after a period of restructuring and marketization and via tendering processes from education providers (Beach & Carlson, 2004).

The SFI program is implemented within the wider framework of the Swedish Municipal Adult Education (MAE), an area with long history that has undergone a number of critical changes over the past decades (Henning Loeb, 2007). Before providing a detailed account in the following chapters it is important to mention here that MAE, and thus SFI, are positioned in a field where directives from two different sources are expected to be implemented by the education providers in the classrooms. On the one hand the state has the responsibility of providing an educational philosophy formulated in terms of a curriculum which has specific directions, goals and content for the MAE and SFI. On the other hand the municipalities are responsible for implementing these objectives via MAE. As a result MAE becomes subjected to municipal directives which result from the marketization of adult education and are linked to strict economic considerations (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012). Figure 1 provides an illustration of the framework within which SFI is situated.

**Figure 1**



Relevant research has identified a number of controversial points resulting from the clash between economic considerations and pedagogical values (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012; Beach, 2006; Beach & Carlsson, 2004; Henning Loeb, 2007). At the same time the ethnic landscape of Sweden has changed over the past decades due to increasing global conflicts and refugeeism (Berhanu, 2010; Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014). The change in the population composition of the country is reflected in the statistics about adult education where the percentage of students who were born abroad is constantly increasing and the courses in Swedish as a foreign language have the largest numbers in terms of participants (Skolverket, 2015a, 2015b). The present study is inspired by questions related to the implementation of the above coming directives in the naturalistic setting of the classroom, the potential challenges that may result and the strategies used by students and teachers in order to overcome the perceived difficulties.

## Aims

The aim of the study is to gain a better understanding of the conditions that may pose challenges to the educational experience of teachers and students within SFI by identifying potential sources of distress and confusion. Particular attention is also paid to the corresponding strategies used in order to overcome the difficulties in the diverse educational environment of an SFI classroom. The overall purpose of the study is to help constitute SFI a more democratic and efficient educational program with a societal projection.

## Research questions

The study is driven by the following research questions:

1. Which conditions resulting from the implementation of state and municipal policy are perceived as challenging by the students and teachers in the naturalistic setting of an SFI classroom?
2. Which strategies are employed by students and teachers in order to overcome the perceived challenges?

In order to investigate the research questions the structure of the thesis is the following: The literature review in chapter 2 provides an overview of key concepts in the history of adult education and SFI. Notions such as the marketization of adult education, tendering processes, the work-first principle and other relevant terms will be incorporated and discussed. The purpose is to help gain an informed image of the present situation of adult education in Sweden. Subsequently the reader will get familiar with the history of SFI, significant changes that have taken place during the previous decades, differences in philosophy and structure of its curricula, as well as practical information about its structure. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the theoretical framework within which the study is conducted. Notions from the sociocultural theory will be discussed as well as more critical approaches to second language learning and intercultural education. Chapter 4 focuses on the methods used for the implementation of the study followed by the findings and their interpretation in chapter 5. Finally, the findings are discussed in chapter 6 along with potential limitations and recommendations for further research in the conclusion.



## 2. Literature review

### Municipal Adult Education in Sweden

In order to proceed with focusing on the SFI program it is first very important to gain a good understanding of the framework within which it is situated and implemented, namely the Swedish Municipal Adult Education.

To begin with, the political model traditionally applied in Sweden and the rest of the Nordic countries was that of a social democratic welfare state, implying an insistence on solidarity, community and equality (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). In the same spirit educational policies in these countries reflected the will to promote the above mentioned values and adult education soon became a central and important issue. Following a large-scale reform, Municipal Adult Education (MAE) was launched in 1968 when the responsibility for providing formal adult education in Sweden was transferred to the municipalities and MAE became an established part of the educational system (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012).

Based on the relationship between the state and the educational provision, Henning Loeb (2007) distinguishes between three different periods in the history of the Swedish Municipal Adult Education. During the first period (1970-1990), MAE was established as a means to provide second chance to those in need of it. Gradually long-term goals were formulated for the society as a whole in the years between 1967 and 1975: terms such as equality, democracy, economic growth and the satisfaction of learners' individual preferences. Nevertheless, what is prominent in the first two decades of MAE is a transition from a particularly centralized and regulated educational governance and policy toward a decentralized system; one that gradually transfers the exertion of power and control from a national to a sub-national level. Moving on to the second period (1990-1997) the role of the state continues to change significantly in relation to MAE, since the former does not provide strictly formulated guidelines but it rather takes the responsibility of promoting frameworks and objectives which are to be implemented by the municipalities. Finally, the most recent factor significant enough to introduce a third period is the introduction of the Adult Education Initiative in 1997 along with the creation of a quasi-market in MAE.

The Adult Education Initiative (AEI) was a large-scale reform focusing on the reduction of unemployment and the development of adult education (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012; Henning

Loeb, 2007). However this restructuring has had an enormous impact on the way MAE is organized and implemented. The government supported the creation of a quasi-market in adult education where public money is allocated to independent adult education providers via tendering processes and a voucher system. In this way market logic is introduced in the process under which students may be seen as clients and education as a product (Beach & Carlsson, 2004). The term quasi-market is used due to the fact that the process of allocating students to the various independent MAE providers is mediated by a state controlled agency responsible for the particular procedure. This agency examines the backgrounds and needs of the students and then registers them in one of the MAE providers who are subsequently funded by the state. At the same time the role of MAE as a means to satisfy the long-term educational needs of the society has been suppressed by the idea of the work-first principle; namely, to satisfy needs of the labour market by introducing short-term educational initiatives that move the focus of education toward narrower goals. Criticism against this model of MAE has been stark and focuses on aspects such as the emphasis on individual responsibility for development and employability, the fact that adult education is open to market forces, or the devaluation of liberating educational ideals like humanism and creativity in the name of effectiveness and performance (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012; Beach, 2006; Beach & Carlsson, 2004; Henning Loeb, 2007; Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014).

The transition from one of the most centralized and regulated educational systems to one of the most decentralized ones (Lundahl, 2002 as cited in Henning Loeb, 2007) is not accidental. On the contrary it reflects a change in scope concerning the goals and function of education which, in turn, are directly determined by the political and economic ideology prevalent in each era. As such the transition from a centralized to a decentralized educational model coincides, or more precisely, is the result of a switch from a social democratic model of governance toward a more neoliberal approach. If both philosophies are to be placed on the two extremes of a line, then Sweden serves as a good example of a country that was traditionally a social democratic welfare state and has gradually moved towards adopting a neoliberal political agenda. However, the country is not to be placed on either of the two extremes. As Arnesen and Lundahl (2006) argue, the Nordic countries find themselves in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century having retained many aspects of the social democratic welfare state (solidarity, comprehensiveness, collective political action) but also endorsed aspects of a liberal welfare state (market solutions, individual choice and responsibility).

Many researchers agree that this shift in the political agenda has brought about a number of crucial transformations in education (and adult education). The introduction of a neoliberal political agenda inserted terms such as market solutions, devolution and competition in the place where philosophies of universalism, comprehensiveness and solidarity traditionally stood. The former might work against the valuing of inclusion and equity in a time when Sweden has entered an era of multiculturalism and globalization with a tremendous change of its ethnic landscape and composition (Berhanu, 2010). At the same time a decentralized system of this kind can potentially result in diverging local practices that lack the ability to take into consideration the particular needs and life contexts of its ‘consumers’ (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014). When the locus of interest moves away from the rationales of inclusion and comprehensiveness toward competition and consumerism, then sensitive parts of the population, such as immigrants, might serve as potential threats to schools in their effort to achieve high productivity (Beach & Dovemark, 2011; Beach & Sernhede, 2011) or may even be depicted as constituting a social problem category (Trondman, 2006). This can be very problematic, to say the least.

To conclude with, Municipal Adult Education, with its long history in Sweden, has become a tension laden field due to the interdependence of different interests stemming from the educational and social policy in relation to the economy and the labour market (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012). This situation results in a number of controversies or paradoxes when policy is to be implemented in the classroom. To set the scene, a number of such points are juxtaposed in the remainder of this chapter so as to provide the framework within which the SFI program is positioned today.

1. Relevant literature identifies a gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and comprehensiveness and its daily application in the classroom (Berhanu, 2010);
2. Although the latest initiatives stress the importance of flexibility and individual choice, they actually require self-reliant learners (even if this is not frequently the case) whose life situation is not taken into account (Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014);
3. Contrary to what was stated in the goals of the AEI, it is the needs of the labour market on the spotlight and not the needs of the individuals who wish to fulfill their educational aspirations (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012);

4. Despite the various discourses which linked the restructuring of adult education to positive laden terms such as flexibility or freedom of choice, the expected benefits have not been realized (Beach & Carlsson, 2004).

## Swedish for immigrants

### **A short history of the program**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, education has been traditionally considered as a means against unemployment and social exclusion in the policy framework of the Nordic countries (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). To this effect the Swedish government introduced SFI in 1965 in order to provide a basic knowledge of the Swedish language to the newly arrived immigrants (Skolverket, 1997). Up till now it constitutes an important part of the Municipal Adult Education.

SFI is a voluntary program offering free tuition to adult students with a mother tongue other than Swedish (Skolverket, 2012b). Since its beginning, in the 1960's, it has gone through various stages of development. Based on curricula, SFI syllabi, public inquiries and teaching material, Rosén and Bagga-Gupta (2013) identify four phases in the history of the program:

1. Phase 1(1965-1980): Although SFI was introduced in 1965 as a way to facilitate the settlement of newly arrived immigrants, the first curriculum was created in 1971. During this early stage of the program it is evident that SFI is a language education mainly for male workers with an orientation toward their rights and duties.
2. Phase 2 (1981-1993): A pluralistic perspective is in force during this period. The course participants are no longer referred to as workers whereas emphasis is placed on their rights to participate in society as potentially empowered members whose lives can be transformed through education. Differences, such as linguistic or cultural ones, are not considered negative.
3. Phase 3 (1994-2005): The socio-psychological discourse of pluralism is gradually replaced by a deficit perspective where lack of knowledge of the Swedish language is depicted as a major societal problem that needs to be tackled. Simultaneously, centralized tests with a focus on language skills are becoming a general tendency in Sweden.

4. Phase 4 (2006-present): In line with the marketization of MAE, SFI is characterized by a market-oriented perspective. The language is in the centre of education, which has now a numerical focus (distinction between L1 and L2). Participation in the labour market is rendered crucial and therefore knowledge of Swedish is essential to this process.

Marie Carlson (2007) provides an illuminating account of the teaching material used in SFI from the beginning of the program until recently. Apart from the pedagogical content, the teaching material reveals ideas and directions about the purpose of the education provided to immigrants and their interaction to society. There is a change from the focus on an active working life during the 60's (when the immigrant was expected to learn how to solve practical issues related to their job) to the 'welfare consumer' of the 70's and 80's. However, the image of the immigrant is still that of a person who needs support in a welfare state. Finally, the teaching material from the 90's onwards stresses the importance of education prior to work, in line with what Rosén and Bagga-Gupta have argued above (2013).

### **Syllabus and course structure**

In 2012 a revised syllabus for SFI was published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket). The main points concerning the program may be summarized as follows:

1. The aim of the program is to provide adult immigrants with a basic knowledge of the Swedish language so that they can develop a functioning L2. To this effect education should offer the appropriate language tools with regard to communication and active participation in all aspects of life (daily interaction, society and work) including, if necessary, the provision of basic reading and writing skills.
2. The course is targeted toward people with different backgrounds, educational experiences and study goals. As such it should be adapted to their personal needs and aspirations and be planned in accordance with them.
3. The education should be designed in a flexible way so that it allows the combination with other work-related activities on behalf of the students. Flexibility is constituted in terms of time, place, context and forms of work.

4. All students should be able to develop their intercultural competence. To achieve this they ought to be able to reflect over their own cultural heritage and background as well as to compare it with different aspects of life in Sweden (Skolverket, 2012b).

Furthermore, the program is divided into four progressive courses (A, B, C and D) which students are expected to complete via three different study routes. Depending on their previous education and study needs, a student may enter the education through route 1 (A and B), route 2 (B and C) or route 3 (C and D). In this way students who lack literacy skills are placed on the A course/route 1, whereas students with academic training are normally placed on the C course/route 3. No matter which route is used as an entry point, all participants are expected to eventually finish the whole program by reaching and completing the D level (Skolverket, 2012b).

### **Relevant research**

While reading about relevant research in this chapter, the reader should always have in mind that SFI constitutes a very important part of MAE. As such the development of the program throughout its history is in large part affected by the changes and tensions that have been identified in the restructuring of MAE. A very characteristic example of this is that the restructuring of MAE in Gothenburg began experimentally with SFI before expanding to other parts of adult education (Beach & Carlsson, 2004). In this respect, criticism against the marketization of MAE, mentioned in the previous chapter, is in large part relevant to the problematic aspects of SFI.

In a recent evaluative report about SFI Reichenberg (2015) concludes that students and teachers are on average satisfied with the learning environment and their professional work respectively. However educational and learning challenges still remain. To be more precise, a substantial proportion of research identifies a number of rather problematic issues situated within SFI. Lindberg and Sandwall (2007) argue that although SFI is considered by many as a privileged program (due to its position within the Swedish educational system and the funding it receives from the government) a lot of problems arise from the emphasis that has been placed on the program as a labour market instrument. Their criticism toward this type of education providing focuses on its failure to account for individual development against economic considerations, practice- instead of research-driven tuition and high drop-out rates.

The lack of long-term and research-informed educational initiatives results in the degradation of the program as a professional field. The unstable working conditions of many teachers within the tendering system of MAE are another factor that adds to this effect. In addition, many of the conclusions about the program are often drawn from statistical data which, according to the authors, are very limited in scope and unable to incorporate the complexity and multiple dimensions of SFI. In order to re-establish the professional character of the program they propose the recruitment of new teachers and the in-service training of the existing ones, as well as, the development of theory driven practices in SFI.

Rosén and Bagga-Gupta (2013) argue that although SFI is an educational field characterized by a diversity of linguistic and cultural ways (due to the composition of its student population) it is the dominant (Swedish) discourse that is reflected in policy. They identify a shift of attention to different goals among the various curricula: from a worker- to a work-oriented perspective; or from a discourse of pluralism and care taking towards the tendency to identify integration with participating in the labour market. The result is that SFI constitutes nowadays an educational field where Swedish needs to be taught as quickly as possible in order to constitute its participants employable (for a discussion of the work-first principle see also Anderson & Wärvik, 2012). Since time is not enough, values such as democracy, equality and empowerment move obligatory toward the margins. In addition, the various language varieties present in the classroom constitute identity signalers that allow the inclusion or exclusion of the participants from an imagined community, in which Swedish is the norm. In this way boundaries are created between the Swedish and the non-Swedish and course participants are constantly contrasted against an imagined community ascribed with positive characteristics such as being good, modern and gender equal (Rosén, 2013; Rosén & Bagga-Gupta, 2015).

In a similar spirit, Carlsson (2007) argues that within SFI Sweden is described as ‘purely’ Swedish despite the diversity of its population. Customs, ideals and norms of the ‘Swedish way’ are presented together with language instruction. There results a dichotomy between the Swedes and the others. For Carlsson this has implications and constitutes a normative requirement imposed on SFI participants. They are expected not only to know about social facts but also to adapt to them and thus become employable and integrated into society. Not doing so implies their stigmatization and marginalization. At the same time, participants

experience an unfair attribution of characteristics, such as being traditional (the term here carries a negative valence), which they are expected to abandon and adopt a new way of living. Based on the personal experience of female Turkish SFI students, Carlson (2007) argues that a reflexive resistance towards 'Swedishness' is developed as well as a reluctance concerning SFI in general. Participants find themselves between the culture of their homeland and the normative social prerequisites imposed on them through SFI (Carlson, 2006; Elmeroth, 2003). A common characteristic of the above mentioned research is that participants are considered to be in a weak position with regard to their previous education. For example, most of Carlson's participants were Turkish women with few years of education who had come to Sweden in order to get married and experienced an unfair attribution of characteristics by their teachers. Elmeroth (2003) focused on refugees who were either illiterate or had very few years of formal education and had suffered difficult war conditions. The contrast made here is between the literate teacher and the weak illiterate student.

Zachrison (2014) has also identified a number of interesting phenomena on the topic. She argues that students experience a dissociation of the course content and their everyday lives, concluding that the program is not linked to the students' social reality. As a result most of them have feelings of non-belonging and otherness while, simultaneously, they invigorate attachment to their own ethnic establishments and thus are lead to increased isolation from the biggest part of the society.

International research, in addition, has identified a number of problematic issues with regard to adult immigrant language education. One important realization is that adult immigrants constitute a unique and understudied group of learners (compared to international students, for example) due to the diversity which characterizes the particular student populations and the lack of theoretically grounded research. At the same time there are significant indications that the needs of these students are not fully met resulting in high drop-out rates (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008). Furthermore, obscurity concerning terms such as diversity and integration leads to the objectification of the learners in the educational framework with significant effects on their identity construction (Allen, 2006); or direct the focus toward the projection of cultural inadequacies against a dominant culture while concealing institutional racism (Araújo, 2016).



What is common among many authors is a realization that more research is necessary to shed light on aspects of SFI that have not yet received as much attention as they should normally have. Henning Loeb and Lumsden Wass (2014) stress the fact that there is a lack of empirical studies within this field in a time when the majority of the students enrolled in MAE, let alone SFI, were born abroad. In addition, the engagement with sociocultural aspects of adult immigrant second language learning should be desirable especially in an educational field where power relations are assumed and cognitive approaches are dominant (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2007). To stress the importance of such approaches, Rosén and Bagga-Gupta mention that ‘formal education may be regarded as a central arena for the implementation and interpretation as well as the negotiation of and defiance towards language policy. Thus language policies are being interpreted, negotiated and implemented at different levels of the educational system; stretching from the national ministry of education to the classrooms. However, the research concerned with the dynamic relationship between language policy and educational practice is rather limited in scope’ (2015, p. 61).

### 3. Theoretical framework

The study is driven by a Vygotskian theoretical framework. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) is a theory of mind building upon the claim that human activities are mediated. To begin with, people use tools in their daily lives with the purpose of interacting with their environment. These material tools, let it be a shovel for example, are culturally constructed, modified, and inherited throughout human history; thus Vygotsky's approach emphasizes the historical character of human cognition. One can dig a hole by using their own hands but experience has shown that the same activity is done a lot more easily by using a shovel. In this way the act of digging a hole is mediated by a tool, the shovel in this case, that has been present for a while, used by previous generations, and proven to be effective. In the same sense SCT claims that our human mind is mediated by tools, only in this case they are not physical but symbolic (or psychological). The use of symbolic tools, among which language is considered the most important, mediates our relationship with the world, the people around us but also with ourselves (Kozulin et al., 2003; Lantolf, 2000).

Two very important concepts associated with SCT are the zone of proximal development and internalization. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a metaphor used to indicate the distance between the level of a person's cognitive ability when engaged in individual problem solving and the potential mental development when problem solving is happening in collaboration with a more experienced person. The latter process is called assisted performance and points to the argument that what can be achieved with assistance will later lead to cognitive development through internalization. Internalization happens within the ZPD through social processes that allow the passing of cognitive development from the interpsychological (between people) to the intrapsychological (mental) plane. It is important to mention here that zones of proximal development may even be developed among people with different competence even if no 'expert' is involved (Donato, 2000; Snyder Ohta, 2000). The ZPD is in this sense an outline of the argument that learning and cognitive development are the result of social interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). In addition, Kozulin (2003) argues that the notion of ZPD provides insights related to issues of assessment such as the focus on potential psychological functions which have not yet fully emerged, the legitimization of assisted performance as part of the assessment, and the conceptualization of the difference between the level of actual and potential performance.

With regards to second language acquisition (SLA), SCT offers a holistic approach by providing analytic constructs on how learners acquire L2 competence through social interaction (Snyder Ohta, 2000). Possibilities for collaborative activities in the classroom may have a lot of benefits for learners with diverse backgrounds (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2007). Having in mind that psychological tools are culture specific and inherited, the multicultural composition of a classroom, as in the case of SFI, is characterized by the co-existence of different systems of psychological tools, with educational integration being identified as a problem of acquiring new systems of psychological tools on behalf of the students or even teachers (Kozulin, 2003). In this framework the learning of a second language is not delimited to the acquisition of grammatical or lexical structures but is defined as ‘a struggle of concrete socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the symbolically mediated lifeworld of another culture. These individuals have intentions, agency, affect, and above all histories, and are frequently, though not always, known as people’ (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 155). The above mentioned participation metaphor within SLA comes as a compliment to the acquisition model (the teaching of language as a coding system). They are both important; however approaches which only stress the significance of the latter may lead to severely handicapped learners (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Lantolf (2003) argues that in the case of SLA internalization is a process identified with the mental construction of once physically present cognitive objects (whether visual or acoustic). Learning a second language is an endeavor facilitated by two very important factors: private speech and imitation. Private speech is an attempt to direct social speech, happening during interactions in the ZPD, to oneself and to mediate one’s own mental activity by using audible speech. This phenomenon is often expressed when the person faces difficult conditions and reveals the struggle to regain control over one’s own situation (Roebuck, 2000). Thus private speech originates from the speech of others but it consequently gains a private function and, as cognitive development moves on, it becomes inner speech. Inner speech is no longer observable as it has taken the form of a psychological tool that mediates interaction. Furthermore, imitation during interactions in SLA is fundamental to internalization in the sense that it has a transformative potential by implying agency and intentionality. Thus it should not be identified with copying, which lacks the above mentioned properties. Its contribution is unique as it directs attention toward specific elements rendered important by learners themselves (Lantolf, 2003; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

What is evident throughout the examination of the major concepts within SCT is an emphasis on the importance of human agency. Leontiev's Activity Theory (AT) is a crystallization of Vygotsky's major concepts, in which agency holds a central role (Lantolf, 2000). Activities in this framework are actions motivated by either biological needs (such as hunger) or culturally constructed ones (such as learning a second language). When such needs are directed at particular objects they become motives. Motives are realized in specific actions which are goal directed, through appropriate means and under particular conditions or operations. To better understand the concept of activity, one can contrast it to that of a task in the classroom. L2 learners who are occupied with the same task (for example the writing of a story) are at the same time involved in different activities because they are all uniquely constructed individuals, with own sociocultural histories, goals and motives. The task is what the teacher wants the learner to do whereas the activity is what the learner actually does. Thus AT can account for the positioning of individuals as active agents in the L2 classroom. During the social interactions that take place individuals 'use their linguistic resources to align themselves with others and to position themselves in the activity. Furthermore, social interaction entails a frame, that is, a set of shared expectations on the part of the participants as to what the interaction ought to entail' (Roebuck, 2000, p. 90). In this way, collective engagement with a task may lead to different outcomes than what was initially expected. Through social interaction learners may reposition themselves and bring about a different learning experience in which they are the subjects and not the objects.

But how much space is allowed in an L2 classroom so that learners may actually realize their roles as agents? As mentioned above, within the participation metaphor, SLA is the process of becoming a member of a specific community and thus of being able to communicate in its language and according to its norms (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). The authors in this case wonder about the implications resulting from the move of an individual towards participating in discursive practices of another culture and the role of identity. What they mention is that individuals may experience a loss of agency as they internalize L2 concepts. This kind of loss is not only related to one's connection with the world but also to the connection with his or her own self.

Critical approaches to SLA are interested in how social relationships are lived out in language and how the use of texts and discourses is used by individuals to construct and negotiate

identity and power (Luke, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2004). Agency holds a central role here as these approaches stress the existence of power relations in the interactions between teachers and students and see schools as power-laden sites. In many cases educational integration is conceived in such a way that students (and in this case immigrant students) become the objects rather than the subjects of the process, thus causing the feeling of losing control over one's own situation (Allen, 2006). Although SCT celebrates the incorporation of identity and agency as an indispensable part of the learning process (activity theory, for example), issues of dominance of the majority group may pose obstacles to this. From a sociocultural point of view the oppression of identity and agency is rather problematic as it keeps out of the game a crucial factor. This situation can lead to internal or external conflicts as learners struggle to keep their own identity while trying to exert agency and control within a power laden field.

According to Canagarajah (2004) a successful language learner is constituted on the way that he or she resolves the above mentioned conflicts. Faced with such problematic circumstances, learners often retain from externalizing identities which are not welcomed by the dominant culture. However, there can be instances during which learners create sites which are relatively free from authority surveillance and they allow interaction and communication on one's own terms. These 'safe houses', as Canagarajah terms the notion, are created either in the classroom (passing of notes, small group interaction and activities, etc.), or outside of it (the school cafeteria, library, etc.). Ethnographic research remains to uncover the ways that 'safe houses' facilitate the negotiation of conflicting identities. What is important for the present study is that these sites allow the learners' capacity for critical awareness and agency and enable them to strategically position themselves without explicitly opposing the dominant norms (Canagarajah, 2004).

Furthermore, the composition of the student bodies within SFI is such that they exhibit high levels of diversity where culture is an omnipresent factor. The term diversity refers to 'long-standing intra-state cultural differences in societies with differing ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious groups or to new forms of cultural diversity brought about by demographic changes and migratory movements' (Luciak, 2010, p. 44). The diverse multicultural student bodies, as mirrors of the wider society, require a very special educational approach capable of incorporating and accounting for their unique character. This is important not only for the daily practice in the classroom, since issues of language, social class, religion and nationality

may even pose challenges to higher levels of the education structure, such as the local or national government (Gundara & Portera, 2008). This supposition is very important for the present study.

In this spirit, intercultural education is a field of educational research that may account for the above mentioned complexity. According to Lahdenperä (2000) the term intercultural refers to interaction processes of mutual character between people of different cultural backgrounds. It is important to have in mind that the SFI syllabus mentions intercultural competence as one of the program aims (Skolverket, 2012b). Interactions and communication in the classroom may lead to what Lahdenperä refers to as intercultural attitude: the shift of focus from the background of the students toward the teacher's consciousness of his or her own cultural background and the way it affects others. This shift may create the conditions for more equal relations in the classroom with regard to how cultural differences and conflicts are defined. As Luciak argues, the aim of intercultural education is to 'deepen students' knowledge and appreciation of different cultures, to reduce prejudices, to pinpoint the interdependence of the world community, and – if it encompasses an anti-racist approach– to facilitate a critical awareness of institutional discrimination and the origins of societal inequalities' (2006, p. 75). It is evident that the role of the teacher is crucial in shaping an intercultural attitude while struggling to avoid essentialism when it comes to the term culture. This difficult task may be accomplished 1) by having in mind that belonging to an ethnic group does not automatically define culture, 2) by establishing a close relation with the student and assessing the situation based on the specific case, and 3) by dealing with culture as a constantly fluid and multidimensional factor (Luciak, 2010).

## 4. Methodological approach

### Why ethnography?

An ethnographic approach is adopted for the conduct of the study. Briefly this entails that three major components are at the core of the method: participant observation, interviews and the role of the researcher (Christensen, 2010). The latter tries to gain an understanding of problematic issues by engaging himself or herself in a naturalistic environment in terms of a prolonged and sustained engagement (Mertens, 2010). The nature of the research questions is such that it demands a close examination of phenomena which intersect in the educational field of a classroom. A number of actors are involved, who are all relevant to the investigation but are positioned on different levels in terms of structure: from the macro (state) down to the micro (classroom) level. A method is necessary here such that it can deal with the different position and peculiar character of each actor in order to provide in the end a potentially holistic and informed account. As Beach and Sernhede (2011) argue, ethnographic approaches are based on the assumption that there is a dialectical relationship between human social practices (what happens in the classroom), human consciousness (what is in the mind of the informants) and social structures (how SFI is situated within the formal educational system). The brackets show the connection of the above supposition to the present study. Combining these factors in a common methodological approach provides a well-grounded framework with the help of which the research questions can be problematized. Bryman (2012) summarizes the characteristics of ethnography as consisting of immersion in social settings for an extended period of time; regular observations; engagement in conversations; informant interviews; relevant documentation; development of an understanding within specific contexts; and the writing up of detailed accounts. Although this list cannot constitute an exhaustive account of what ethnography is, the present study is based to a large extent on these characteristics.

### Empirical Data

#### **Setting, access and sampling**

The research field of the study is a MAE provider in Gothenburg, Sweden. The institution has a long history in adult education and, apart from SFI, it offers a wide range of courses. The building is quite big with many facilities: well-equipped classrooms of various sizes,

computer and staff rooms, a large school cafeteria and many other places where students and staff can relax and socialize. It is a quite busy place throughout the day.

The first approach was made by contacting the director of studies. Although identification of the appropriate agents who have the capacity to provide access may be a complex procedure (Mertens, 2010), permission to conduct the research was given in very short time. This included the opportunity to conduct observations within the premises of the institution, access to the online learning platform used by teachers and students as well as sampling for the purpose of the study.

Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2007) was used for the selection of informants, so that the particular student group in focus presents high levels of diversity among its members. With the help of the director of studies a particular class was determined as the field of study. The class is at the C level, implying that all students have had at least twelve years of formal education. Nevertheless, it exhibits a high level of diversity. The majority of the students are war refugees from Syria. This means that they are registered in a special introductory program from the municipality, part of which consists of the tuition in the Swedish language. Apart from SFI, these students are obliged to follow a number of different activities which may include social tuition or even work placements and are organized by the Public Employment Agency (Arbetsförmedlingen). The rest of the class is mainly students from European countries and few of them come from Asia (mainly China and Iran) or the U.S.A. There are also significant differences in terms of age: most of the students are around their twenties or thirties but there are also those in their fifties.

The lesson takes place four times a week and lasts for three hours. Half of the lessons are held in the morning and half in the afternoon. The classroom is quite comfortable, though not too big. Desks and chairs are positioned in a circle so that everyone can have direct visual access to the others. There is a whiteboard along with a computer and projection facilities.

### **Participant observation**

The terms ethnography and participant observation are frequently used interchangeably due to the fact that they both stress the importance of immersing oneself in a group for an extended period of time. However, for the purpose of this study it is argued that the terms are not



identical and that ethnography refers to a study in which participant observation is one of the main methods used (for a more detailed account of the differences between the two terms see also Bryman, 2012).

Immersion in social settings requires that the researcher adopts a specific approach concerning the level of participation and involvement. This is determined by the role of the observer in the field and the degree up to which his or her identity is known to those being observed. There results a continuum with the two extremes of a completely detached observer to a complete participant (Cohen et al., 2007). In the present study the researcher was an overt participating observer because 1) his identity was known, and 2) he participated in the core activities of the group, but not as a full member (Bryman, 2012).

With regards to field notes during the observations, particular attention was paid to keeping quick jottings of key words related to significant events or conversations. More detailed observations were written down immediately after the event or when circumstances allowed. Furthermore, a time order was attached to the field notes to allow for a chronological overview during the analysis. The whole process was aimed at providing thick descriptions of the social setting (Cohen et al., 2007).

## **Interviews**

According to Miller and Glassner ‘a strength of qualitative interviewing is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts of social worlds’ (2011, p. 144). As such, interviews constitute one of the most important sources of information in qualitative research.

For the purpose of this study semi-structured informant interviews were conducted, implying that the interviewees had relatively more control in directing the conversation and altering the agenda (Hobson & Townsend, 2010).

Five students and two teachers participated in the interviews. Four of the students and one teacher come from the same group in which participant observation was conducted. The other two are from the same institution but from different groups (although the level is still the same, namely the C course). Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the informants’ background. It is evident that all students have a quite high level of education and have been

studying more or less the same amount of time in SFI (mean= 10 months), apart from Albina who is relatively new to the course. Concerning the teachers, they have a significant difference in terms of work experience since Erika has been an SFI teacher for 22 years whereas Maria is in her third year of teaching.

**Table 1**

*Background of the students*

Name	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Mother tongue	Education	Has been in Sweden for	Has studied in SFI for
Mohammed	24	M	Syria	Arabic	Law	18 months	10 months
Sara	28	F	Syria	Arabic	Social Sciences	14 months	9 months
Albina	26	F	Slovenia	Croatian	Criminal Justice	20 months	1 month
Evangelia	27	F	Greece	Greek	Commercial Business	11 years (with intervals)	11 months
Peter	34	M	Romania	Romanian	Law	3 years	10 months

**Table 2**

*Background of the teachers*

Name	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Mother tongue	Education	Work in SFI
Erika	57	F	Sweden	Swedish	Swedish and Swedish as a Second Language	22 years
Maria	31	F	Sweden	Swedish	Swedish as a Second Language	3 years

The interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks. The language used was mainly English; however two interviews were conducted in Swedish and Greek in order to facilitate the process. Attention was paid to ensure a quiet and protected environment as location is very important during this particular process (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

An interview guide approach was followed, implying the existence of topics to be discussed in the form of an outline (Cohen et al., 2007). Initially, the informants provided some background information about themselves. Although spontaneous follow-up questions were part of the process, the interviews were mainly guided by the following topics:

- Overall impression of the course

- Daily practices / routines
- Expectations and difficulties in realizing goals
- Personal experience with regard to enrollment and placement (for students)
- Personal experience with regard to educational planning, assessment and policy implementation (for teachers)

The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the informants and produced a total of 310 minutes of voice recordings, which were subsequently transcribed resulting in 90 A4 pages of interview transcripts.

## Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used in the study in order to interpret the data. Although there is no consensus as to the exact series of procedures (Bryman, 2012), the following steps were followed as an analytic approach (Rapley, 2011):

- The researcher familiarized himself with the field notes and interview transcripts in terms of a prolonged period of engagement and reflection
- Initial codes were identified throughout the dataset
- Similar codes were collated into potential themes
- Categories were created in order to incorporate the identified themes

## Quality criteria

Quality criteria were taken into consideration throughout the whole process of the study. More specifically, trustworthiness was aimed at by focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Mertens, 2010):

- Credibility was enhanced as much as time allowed in terms of a prolonged and persistent engagement in the field. The researcher engaged as an overt participating observer in the classroom and other social occasions related to the research topic. Informants were asked to check the data in order to establish ‘a higher level of accuracy and consensus’ (Mertens, 2010, p.257). The consistency in data from

different sources, such as field notes, interview transcripts and institutional documents, was checked by triangulation.

- There is the purpose of providing the reader with sufficient details so as to enable judgments on the transferability of the findings. Thick descriptions are to be assumed based on accounts of spatiotemporal, cultural and contextual details.
- Dependability issues are ensured by keeping records of all phases of the project (field notes, interview transcripts or any other document). These are accessible for auditing processes.
- Confirmability (as the equivalent of objectivity in quantitative research) is enabled by allowing the tracking of the findings back to their source.

## Research ethics

The informants, who are all adults, are protected by maintaining confidentiality and anonymity (Bryman, 2012). To this effect pseudonyms are used throughout the study. To avoid lack of informed consent, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were asked to sign a designated consent form. Lack of informed consent and invasion of privacy are mostly issues that have to be dealt with in covert research, so they should not cause implications for the purpose of the present study, in which participation was overt (Mertens, 2010). Nevertheless, ethical considerations were paid particular attention to throughout the entire process, in line with the CODEX rules and guidelines for research (CODEX, 2016).

## 5. Findings and interpretation

### Perceived challenges

Thematic analysis brought about a number of themes related to the first research question, namely conditions in the SFI education which are perceived as challenging from both the students and the teachers. The emerged themes can be accommodated by three broader categories, which are 1) the enrollment and placement process, 2) contradicting demands between the curriculum and the municipal policy, and 3) dealing with diversity.

### **Enrollment and placement process**

As stated in the introduction chapter, the Municipal Adult Education is a field in which different actors are involved. The curriculum represents the educational directives which come from the state and are expected to be implemented at the municipal level via MAE. At this level two major actors are responsible for the implementation of adult education: a mediating agency, run by the municipality, and the various MAE providers (Henning Loeb, 2007). After a student has applied for enrollment in SFI, the municipal agency is responsible for reviewing the application and subsequently for deciding about the placement of the student in one of the available education providers. The process of applying for SFI and the following placement procedure was described as a problematic issue by almost all the informants (students). They stressed a lot of cases in which miscommunication seems to challenge the process. With the term miscommunication a number of problematic instances are implied during which the insufficient communication between the actors involved (or total lack thereof) creates conditions of uncertainty and confusion.

One source of confusion and discomfort has to do with the fact that students may receive contradicting information from the municipal agency or the education provider about the course of their application or studies:

It's a long story about that. It was March when I should start. Nothing happened! I called them (the school) and they said I was not in the queue. From the municipality they told me it's something even connected with my old personal number so they were confused... 'we have you in the base, we don't know why they (the school) didn't invite you.'  
(Albina)

At first they (the school administration) told me that I had to retake the eight-week introduction if I wanted to be at this school and that there was no other option. But now that I've discussed this with my teacher she said that they were wrong. I think this is so stupid because now I am wasting time! (Evangelia)

Both students express confusion, disappointment and anger concerning the controversial information they received which they consider to have caused a significant delay in their studies. In the first case delay in the enrollment process is attributed to a miscommunication between the municipal agency and the education provider, with mutual denial of responsibility. Albina finds herself trapped between two agents and feels that she has no chance of taking things into her own hands. Evangelia on the other hand feels misguided by a lack of cooperation between agents within the same institution, namely her school.

An outcome of this situation is that the informants feel excluded from a decision making process which directly affects their education. They argue that their voice is not heard and they even blame the municipal agency or the school administration for not placing them in the appropriate group. Like in the case of Mohammed, who believes that he did not have any saying in the whole process:

She (the administrator) decided to move me here... yeah, I didn't like that. The class is too slow. (Mohammed)

### **Contradicting demands between the curriculum and the municipal policy**

Another source of stress and discomfort, perceived as a challenge by the informants, is conflicts between the curriculum and the municipal policy. As mentioned in chapter 2, the Municipal Adult Education in Sweden is implemented within a market-logic form of governance in which economic notions such as effectiveness, devolution, flexibility and individualization have gained substantial importance. A need for urgency is stressed, in terms of the work-first principle, so that the course participants can enter the labour market as quickly as possible (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012; Beach, 2006; Beach & Carlsson, 2004; Henning Loeb, 2007; Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014).

As a teacher, Erika believes that the connection of SFI to the labour market has had a detrimental effect on the education. By referring to the refugee students who are enrolled at

the introduction program of the municipality, she gets the opportunity to reflect on and criticize the current situation.

I have to work against the Skolverket curriculum and there are special demands as they are called nowadays... it's not goals but it's demands! So it's much more harsh. And at the same time the municipality wants them (the students in the introduction program) to be active forty hours a week. And we teachers... we are a bit confused. (Erika)

With a teaching experience of more than twenty years, Erika feels that the situation in SFI has worsened. She explicitly stresses the change in the assessment philosophy by contradicting the term 'demands' against the term 'goals'. At the same time she criticizes the connection of the program to the labour market by arguing that it poses extraordinary demands on both the students and the teachers. For example, students who are enrolled at the introduction program need to combine a number of educational activities, including SFI, and at the same time engage in other activities determined by the Public Employment Agency. Their schedule is a fixed forty-hour scheme per week, excluding individual time for studying and doing homework, to which the teachers have no access. Erika focuses on a number of negative outcomes.

Firstly, she talks about students' fatigue and the fact that the way their education is organized does not take into consideration the effort they have to put in combining all the activities. This may negatively affect the learning within SFI.

They've been somewhere else in the morning (another activity within the introduction program), then they come here on the tram or bus and they haven't eaten anything and they are supposed to sit in my classroom for hours and learn new things. That's impossible! It's not human I think to treat people like this. You have to be in activity forty hours a week and of course that's very exhausting and you don't have enough energy to do your homework. And then you don't learn. Of course you don't learn! (Erika)

Secondly, she thinks that her own efforts in shaping educational goals based on her students' needs and aspirations cannot be implemented due to the strict lines imposed by the municipality and the Public Employment Agency on the students' weekly schedules. It is a process in which she cannot intervene.

If I really think that the student needs some hours with a mother tongue teacher, or those computer lessons, or maybe to work with our special teacher, it doesn't count! So even if I put this on my student's schedule and send it to the Public Employment Agency, it's not worth anything in their eyes. Because they consider their own activities are so much more effective... and it's not! (Erika)

Thirdly, she argues that the work-first principle (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012) does not allow students to realize their educational potential as the urgency to enter the labour market takes over the educational goals. There is a dilemma here. Whereas she acknowledges the importance of employment she sees students as whole personalities who are denied the chance to benefit from the holistic educational values mentioned in the curriculum for adult education (Skolverket, 2012a):

You have to do something out of the two demands (curriculum and municipal policy). As a whole person you need to be able to stand up for yourself and your own rights and to participate in the society. And you need to have a job of course to support your family and yourself. But you are so much more I think. (Erika)

Erika worries that some students will not be able to take advantage of their potential because municipal policy encourages immediate transition to the labor market. This is something which is also acknowledged by the students.

It's difficult yeah... but I can find a job. Of course not the same as what I studied in my land. But I can get a job in a supermarket. It's good yeah but I have an ambition to start here a new life for me. I want to have connection with the people. I want to learn and study more in sociology. (Sara)

If you want to improve your life, you need to do much more than a regular job like working in a store or IKEA or a supermarket. If you want to work like in engineering or like a doctor, you have to learn the language and study something. (Peter)

It's important to get a job, but not to any cost. Because sometimes it costs the person too much. Maybe you are highly qualified and the municipality thinks that well, if you can work as a bus driver that's really good because you get a job. And some people that could have had a job that was more in relation to their studies, they just give up. You have to pretend things and I don't think that the politicians are honest! (Erika)



But things may get even worse. During one of the last lessons Erika looks worried: ‘we have had some terrible news about SFI today’. She refers to a directive which came from the municipal agency and introduces a new rule. Students are not allowed to attend the program more than twenty-two weeks for the C course and eighteen weeks for the D course. She seems shocked to have received this new directive within such a short notice and worries that many of her students are going to fail. She believes that this change has been imposed as another measure to promote flexibility and individualization within SFI (Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014). However she considers these terms ironic as they work exclusively in favor of the municipality’s economic budget.

You don’t get more than twenty-two weeks. That’s it! And they call it individualization. But you can’t prolong the course; you can just make it shorter. That’s the aim really. Because there are so many refugees in Gothenburg at the moment and there is not enough money I suppose for education. (Erika)

She directly links economic considerations to the implementation of an initiative (individualization) that is supposed be in the best interest of the students. On the contrary, it works exactly to the opposite direction by posing stricter time limits and allowing flexibility only when students can complete the course faster, thus saving money for the municipality. This new directive has caused her a lot of stress because 1) she does not know yet what the consequences are when students exceed the time limitations, and 2) she feels even more helpless in actively shaping educational goals with her students:

Yeah, that’s very stressful so I didn’t sleep that night because I was thinking, thinking, thinking... Some will pass the course in twenty-two weeks but some won’t... how hard you try they won’t because there are so many things in their life that’s too stressful for them. And I don’t know what happens then. They think it’s none of my business. Probably the Public Employment Agency will put them in activities... different activities. (Erika)

### **Dealing with diversity**

A number of challenging factors to the educational experience in SFI result from the structure of the groups which are situated in the naturalistic framework of the classroom. In this case the implementation of policy related to the placement criteria and the resulting student bodies

create a challenging educational environment. During the placement process the background of the applicants is reviewed so that they can subsequently be placed in an appropriate group. As mentioned in chapter 2 the program is divided in four courses and students may enter the education via three different routes (Skolverket, 2012b). Despite the stratification that takes place, the resulting groups exhibit a rather high degree of diversity among their members in terms of age, ethnicity, educational and cultural background as well as a wide range of language experiences (Luciak, 2010; Rosén & Bagga-Gupta, 2015). The composition of the groups has been described as a challenging factor by all the informants for a number of reasons.

To begin with, teachers expressed concerns in that they have to work in large groups that exhibit high levels of heterogeneity. They admit not having received formal training on how to deal with multicultural groups, even if this is directly connected to their daily practice. At the same time the mobility within their groups is rather high, with new students entering the class throughout the term. In this way the composition of the student bodies is constantly changing and creates a fluid landscape to be dealt with in the classroom. Maria underlines the difficulties of dealing with large and heterogeneous groups, whereas Erika describes the strategy she has used to face this complex situation:

I think that it (diversity) puts a lot of stress on the teachers, when you have so many different levels of language. It is an inclusive course. That means everybody, no matter how good or bad you are, are sitting in the same classroom. On the one hand it is beautifully inclusive. On the other hand it probably has disadvantages in that I might not always have time for either the advanced students or for those who need more explanation on the simplest levels because I am too busy explaining something that I think is already known to the rest of the group. (Maria)

I've learnt to do it. And discussed with colleagues. When I was younger I asked for advice from my older colleagues. Otherwise no, we don't get any formal training. (Erika)

It is important to mention here that the students' perceptions of what constitutes the notion of a good teacher are focused exactly on the ability to deal effectively with diverse groups. In this sense both sides agree on the source of the problem, namely the lack of teaching competence in multicultural educational environments on behalf of the teachers.

Within such diverse groups teachers are concerned with the way in which they can keep track of the students' progress. What they have available at the moment is individual study plans that have been set up for each student. These documents are official and have the purpose of allowing the following up of the students' individual progress (Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014). However the teacher informants challenge the effectivity of the particular documents because they have to put a lot of effort in creating and constantly updating them. In addition, the particular documents are communicated among various actors in MAE. Since teachers are free to edit them, they may potentially serve as sources of self fulfilling prophecy against some students.

It's so much to fill in, but a lot of the students don't understand the real purpose. And also other teachers, when they get mad at some students they want me to write 'we offered help but they didn't want to take it'. And I don't want to write it in an individual study plan because that's a paper a lot of people can read and might get prejudiced against the student. And that is contra productive. (Erika)

Another problematic point is that both teachers and students are concerned with the issue of feedback. Students expressed their irritation in not being able to formally provide feedback about their education. Teachers on the other hand stressed the impact of the cultural background in providing feedback and being critical. Erika argues that her 'western' students are more prompt to be critical during the lessons whereas the rest of the class are not, even though she would prefer them to be. She feels that in this way she is deprived of a very useful source of information, namely the students' voices.

The students that have more western approach to teaching told me 'I would like you to do this and this'. They are very open and that's of course very good because then I know. But a lot of the Arabic students, they don't tell me. So I have to try to understand things. (Erika)

To conclude with, dealing with the diversity of the student groups creates such conditions which challenge the educational experience within SFI. One of the consequences is that many students feel that their teachers do not understand their life situation. Although students realize the difficult task which their teachers have to face, this still creates a distancing in the classroom.

I have problems with my studies but I have also problems with my life. My parents live in Damascus, Syria. And it's very dangerous. I have also problems with finding an apartment. My teachers... some of them understand. But some others don't. 'You need to study! You need to study!' (Mohammed)

The teacher has to discuss with the students and find a way to make them be interested and open. But some of the teachers, they were not open. They were a little bit lost. Maybe they didn't have enough experience to receive the message... like to understand us... that we want something else. (Peter)

## Strategies

The second research question focuses on the strategies employed by students and teachers in order to overcome the perceived challenges in SFI. A common characteristic of the perceived challenges is that informants express feelings of helplessness and lack of control in decision making processes which they believe to directly affect them. In other words, they have argued that the SFI program is implemented within a framework which does not encourage their potential in shaping their own practice in and out of the classroom. However, the interview transcripts and field notes have revealed a number of instances during which the informants were able to actively engage in and modify the conditions within which their education takes place. What all these instances have in common is the exertion of agency on behalf of the participants. They represent opportunities which the teachers and students take in order to deal with the challenges resulting from the implementation of policy in the classroom. In other words, the informants feel that during these occasions they manage to overcome the feeling of helplessness and regain control over their learning. It is these instances that both teachers and students have described as most positive within the program. Notions from a sociocultural theoretical framework are used toward an understanding of the examples that follow (Kozulin 2003; Lantolf, 2000).

Albina describes some of the tasks she and her classmates had to do in the lessons. One of them was about making a short presentation about the culture of their lands. She comments that she was interested from the beginning in doing the presentation and she decided to use PowerPoint. It turned out that she was very successful with the task as her presentation caught

the attention of her classmates who subsequently became very interested in learning how to use PowerPoint from her.

I think I was like a magnet because everybody wanted to speak with me. Everybody wanted help from me and another girl, because we were a little bit better. (Albina)

What happened in this case is that while Albina and her classmates were engaged in a particular task, they created a ZPD. The task of presenting was turned into an activity where Albina could apply her agency to help others who were less competent than her in preparing a PowerPoint presentation. At the same time they could learn from each other by using Swedish. Albina describes the event as a very positive experience that had a significant effect on her and the rest of the group. She admits that her attitude with regard to the diversity in the classroom changed.

At first I didn't want to hang out with anybody because I just wanted to focus on studying. Then I did this and suddenly just something changed and I was interested in those cultures. (Albina)

A similar event happened during a task about the famous Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren and her book series 'Pippi Longstocking'. The students were supposed to present factual information about the writer and provide a summary of Pippi's story. Suddenly a student raised her hand and commented on Pippi's character: 'I don't like Pippi! I don't want my daughter to become like her'. What followed was a discussion about the reasons that lead Lindgren to create a character like Pippi and the impact of the books on the Swedish society in relation to children's rights. A lot of different arguments were heard about the topic with the same student concluding that 'maybe Astrid was wrong'. Again in this case a ZPD was created in which the group could initiate a new activity while arguing about the correctness of a character like Pippi. The teacher was very positive in facilitating the debate and providing guidance. She admits that the change of scope during the task had a very positive impact especially on the particular student because she was able to exert her agency by participating actively in the debate and at the same time she could develop her language by arguing about the topic.

I thought it was so liberating that she had her own opinion, so why not? And she also argued well. With the language she had she could really make a good statement. (Erika)

Erika seems to acknowledge the importance of such occurrences and she is very keen in encouraging them. She talks about Evangelia, one of the informants, as a very positive person who has the features of a good leader.

Some of the students join her so I am very pleased with that. They really want to learn and they want to go fast further so they decided to start a study group. (Erika)

Apart from the study group, Evangelia has decided to begin a photographic project based on the experiences of her classmates as refugees. She is intrigued by the life histories of these people and wants to learn more. She asks for help from Erika who then facilitates the process and allows Evangelia to take some time from the lesson in order to organize her project and provide clarifications to her classmates. A new discussion begins in Swedish about the project and most of the students seem very interested and curious about it. Erika argues that such initiatives provide an internal cohesion to the class.

That's a good thing because it creates bonds between the students and they can feel at home in the group. (Erika)

The importance of this feeling of belonging is also acknowledged by the students. Albina, for example, describes an instance of private speech and imitation she had during one of the lessons. While talking about one of her teachers she mentions the following:

I could swallow her words. I didn't notice but in my comfort zone I repeated the same thing! She opened her mouth and I was just doing the same after her. It was good for me. (Albina)

Another interesting point mentioned by two informants is the importance of creating a language café within the institution. In other words, a specific time space in which students can informally engage in conversations with more competent speakers in order to practice their Swedish while socializing. At the time of writing, language cafés are only organized outside the educational provider by private initiatives. The majority of the informants are active participants in these occasions and have all stressed the importance of engaging in such extracurricular activities.

The will to engage in study groups, photographic projects or language cafés underlines the importance of 'safe houses' within such diverse educational environments (Canagarajah,

2004). Students show a need for these surveillance-free sites where they can practice their language skills and at the same time turn themselves into active agents who gain control of their learning conditions. Even though the fore mentioned activities take place within a regulated institution (apart from the language café), the existence of such opportunities for agency and active participation seem to overcome some of the perceived challenges.

To sum up, the interpretation has provided a number of strategies employed by the informants in order to overcome the challenges resulting from the implementation of policy in the classroom. These strategies have a common ground in that they all promote and facilitate the exertion of agency and the regain of control over one's situation. Students seem to crave for them and teachers are eager to facilitate their occurrence while acknowledging their positive effects.

## 6. Discussion

The study has tried to gain an understanding of a complex situation within the Municipal Adult Education by focusing on the SFI program. Two research questions have served as guides by delimiting the search on the following topics: firstly, the conditions in the SFI program which are perceived as challenging by the informants and which have a close relationship with the content and implementation of policy; and secondly, the strategies employed by the informants in order to overcome the perceived challenges.

With regard to the first research question, three categories have been identified as challenging areas in the educational experience: enrollment and placement process, contradicting demands between the curriculum and the municipal policy, and dealing with diversity.

The placement process has been described by the informants as a procedure which does not allow them much control. As mentioned in relevant literature (Beach and Carlsson, 2004; Henning Loeb, 2007) a state agency, run by the municipality, is responsible for mediating the student placement process and thus the direct contact between the product (education) and its consumers (students) is prohibited. A quasi-market is created in this way. Nevertheless, it is argued that MAE becomes subjected to market forces despite the measures which act against a full marketization. In addition to this, the present study has identified internal communication problems between the mediating agency and the education provider, such that students are provided with incorrect information and feel excluded from decision making processes which directly affect their education. Helplessness and lack of control over one's own situation are thus enforced.

The contradicting demands between the curriculum and the municipal policy have also been identified as challenging factors. Although individualization and flexibility are supposed to create improved educational conditions for the students, it is argued that as initiatives they impose stricter conditions and are incapable of incorporating the individual factor (Henning Loeb & Lumsden Wass, 2014). In other words, they do not take into consideration the life situation of the learners. Connection with the labour market is also rendered negative as it introduces in MAE a number of conflicting interests between the educational policy, the economy and the labour market policy (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012). In addition to the fore mentioned critique, the present study has identified a number of negative outcomes from the



implementation of new initiatives and the connection of MAE to the labour market: Students' increased fatigue and the subsequent poor performance in the program, reduced opportunities for teachers to shape the educational framework for and with their students, and unfavorable conditions for the fulfillment of students' educational potential due to the work-first principle.

With regard to the diversity of the student bodies, the informants stressed the importance of competence on behalf of the teachers when dealing with multicultural groups. Although the existence of appropriate educational content along with suitable working methods are rendered as crucial facilitators in multicultural classrooms, it turns out that this is often not the case (Lahdenperä, 2000). A lack of formal education along with the complex and demanding character of the class result in distancing between teachers and students. In addition, a number of problematic points, such as the unwillingness of students to provide feedback, are attributed by teachers to an essentialized notion of culture (Luciak & Khan-Svik, 2008). This is a phenomenon of which students are aware and needs careful consideration along with an approach that promotes the creation of an intercultural attitude in the classroom (Lahdenperä, 2000).

Concerning the second research question, the study has identified a number of strategies used by the informants in order to overcome the perceived challenges in SFI. There is a common motive behind all strategies, namely the desire to overcome the feeling of helplessness and regain control over the situation. In other words all strategies identified are related to the exertion of agency on behalf of the informants. The creation of zones of proximal development, imitation and private speech, safe houses (such as study groups, language cafés or photographic projects) and the engagement in group activities are all instances during which learners become the subjects of the learning procedure (Allen, 2006; Canagarajah, 2004; Kozulin, 2003; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Roebuck, 2000). They get the opportunity to shape the learning conditions and at the same time they feel competent and content.

However, the context within which adult education is implemented discourages the exertion of agency not only on behalf of the students but also of the teachers. In line with previous research, the study has indicated that the marketization of MAE and its connection to the labour market objectify the learners and decrease the opportunities for intervention from the teachers. Despite the harsh conditions there can still be hope (Berhanu, 2010). It is argued that the educational framework allows the occurrence of student or teacher initiatives with the aim

of promoting agency and active engagement, as was mentioned in the findings chapter. There is however a need for a more systematic approach to the identified strategies. As Beach argues, it is essential to deal with agency as a situational, conditional and contingent issue to struggle for and that 'teachers, as agents, need help through their professional education in recognizing what spaces for positive action are available and how to use them in line with their shared values' (2006, p. 158). Due to the special character of the SFI class, it is also argued that intercultural education may facilitate the above mentioned procedure by repositioning the actors involved and by opening new channels of communication between them. The task is not easy and places a lot of decision making and initiative on the teachers. Further research in the field is necessary in order to investigate the potential of such an approach.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the SFI program in the wider context of the Municipal Adult Education with the purpose of identifying perceived challenges by teachers and students which are closely related to the implementation of policy. On a second level the study tried to investigate the strategies employed by the informants in order to overcome the perceived challenges.

With regard to the first research question, three categories were identified as accommodating challenges in the educational experience of the informants: the enrollment and placement process, contradicting demands between the curriculum and the municipal policy, and dealing with diversity. It is argued that teachers and students experience feelings of helplessness and loss of control, increased levels of fatigue and poor performance, reduced opportunities to intervene in the educational process and discouragement for the implementation of educational potential due to the connection with the labour market. In addition, lack of teachers' competence in dealing with multicultural groups was acknowledged by both the teachers and the students as a major problem in the daily practice.

Concerning the second research question, it is argued that the identified strategies are directed toward overcoming the perceived challenges by stressing the importance of agency in educational practices. With the help of notions from a sociocultural and critical theoretical approach it was concluded that the exertion of agency allows the actors involved to engage actively in and shape the conditions within which learning takes place and thus regain control. It is also argued that the current educational framework still allows such initiatives although there is a need for a more systematic approach. Intercultural education, albeit a difficult endeavor, may serve as a potential facilitator to this process. However more systematic research is necessary in order to investigate the potential benefits.

### Limitations and recommendations for further research

One of the limitations of the study is that all informants are considered to be highly educated with at least twelve years of formal education. This may have affected the interpretation of the data towards a specific direction. Including informants of various educational backgrounds would probably provide a more informed account of the situation.

Furthermore, as Beach and Carlsson argue, within the market-oriented view of adult education learners are viewed by the curricula as economically rational and self-interested individuals (2004). In this sense, there is the risk that the present study has also dealt with the informants as fully rational, well informed agents who implement their rationality in maximizing their expected utilities, in line with the Expected Utility Theory (for a more detailed account and critique of the theory see also Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The length and purpose of the present paper does not allow for an examination of this aspect but it would be very interesting to introduce this factor in the analysis. Namely, future research should also take into consideration the ways in which the notion of rationality is constructed and how it affects the decision making processes of the informants.

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