

Lifelong learning in policy and practice: The case of Sweden

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This paper describes the changes in lifelong learning policy that have taken place since the 1990s in Sweden. Policy documents regarding lifelong learning in Sweden have appeared since 1994. The first of these documents contains general recommendations with regard to lifelong learning, in both a lifelong and a lifewide perspective, concerning pre-school and compulsory school together with adult education and training. Much support for early stages in life can have a tendency to put adult education and learning in second place instead of the whole functioning well together. Regarding lifelong learning in practice, this paper will focus on popular education and study circles. The recently developed knitting cafés will also be accounted for. The paper also asks the question 'Who is getting education and learning in later life?' 'What are the criteria that will give individuals access to these possibilities' and 'What results can be expected?' The theoretical perspective taken in this paper is that social capital is a part of wellbeing, and the paper examines the extent to which this is connected to the social context.

Keywords: *lifelong learning, social capital, wellbeing, popular education, knitting café.*

Introduction

Sweden has a long history of involvement in developing lifelong learning policy (Husén, 1968). This paper investigates whether this has been positive for adult education in practice. Policy documents regarding lifelong learning in Sweden have appeared since 1994. The first of these policy documents from 1994 was called *Grunden för ett livslångt lärande* in Swedish (in English, the *Foundation for lifelong learning*) (SOU, 1994). The second from 1996 contains general recommendations with regard to lifelong learning, from both a lifelong and lifewide perspective, and includes recommendations concerning pre-school and compulsory school together with adult education and training (Government Enquiry Report, 1996/1997). Subsequently, a policy for the introduction and implementation of rules and regulations for establishing a system of early childhood care and education in Sweden was introduced based on lifelong and lifewide perspectives. The policy was expounded in an Official Enquiry Report entitled *Växa i lärande* (SOU, 1997), in English *Growing in learning*, that proposed a new curriculum for children aged between six and 16 years. The initial terms of reference for this Commission required it to carry out its deliberations on childhood education in recognition that this was a constituent part of lifelong learning, with the intention of eventually establishing equivalent conditions for pre-school, primary school and after-school care. The subsequent law based on this report whose English title was *The National Curriculum for Compulsory School* covered children from one to five years of age in day care centres and centres for after school care (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998).

In the proceedings of an International Symposium titled 'Lifelong Learning Policy and Research' (Tuijnman & Schuller, 1999) organised in Sweden, the importance of a lifewide and lifelong learning perspective was stressed and explained like this:

Lifelong learning could be seen as presenting an inclusive framework for the organisation of educational research, bridging research on the learning of very young children with that of young adults and senior citizens (lifelong) and spanning several dimensions of living experiences distributed in time and space (life-wide). Such an inclusive framework would have implications for structuring educational research and its relationships with other fields of study. (Tuijnman, 1999:8)

Much support for education in the early stages in life can have the effect of relegating adult learning and training into second place instead of the whole system functioning well together. According to the common Swedish interpretation of lifelong learning, adult learning and training is a part of lifelong learning, but in many parts of the world, lifelong learning is seen as the equivalent of adult education. This paper also asks the question, 'Who is getting education and learning in later life?' 'What are the criteria that will give individuals access to these possibilities' and 'What results can be expected?' Some people go to university for courses, but this paper will focus on those who participate in popular education and the 'bottom-up' study groups – focussing on the case of knitting circles.

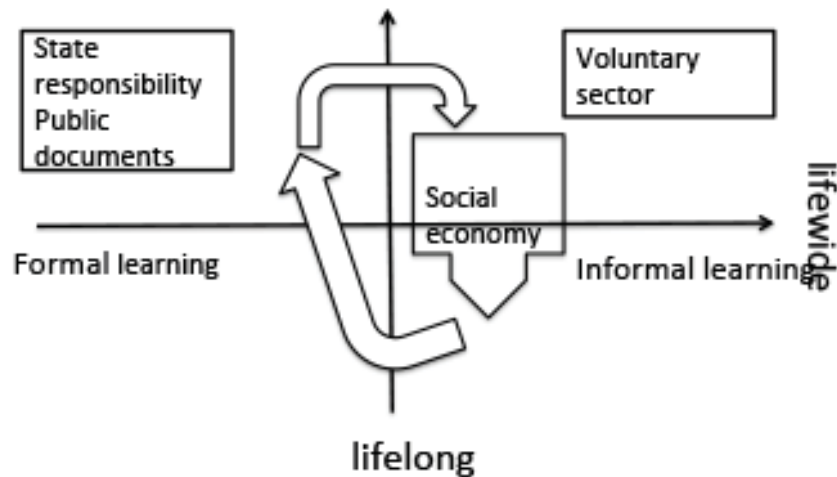
The theoretical perspective underlying this paper views the lifelong learning process as closely connected with the social economy (Boström, 2003). Lifelong learning was first connected to human capital (OECD, 1999), but since 2000 there is growing evidence of the increasing impact of social capital on lifelong learning (Schuller *et al.*, 2004). Social capital is now related to quality of life and wellbeing (OECD, 2001). Therefore, the background for social capital as well as wellbeing will be accounted for first and a model will be proposed for how social capital can be seen as part of wellbeing. Then the part of adult education that is most accessible to all older adults, at least in theory, popular education, is described and a recent evaluation of participants aged 65+ years in study circles is accounted for and compared with the recent developed knitting cafés/circles.

Lifelong learning and social economy

The place of lifelong learning in society can be illustrated as shown in Figure 1. The vertical axis shows the lifelong learning perspective from birth to death. The horizontal axis shows the lifewide learning perspective with formal learning to the left and informal learning to the right in the model. The social economy and its relation to lifelong learning are also shown in the model. The social economy is to be found on the right-hand side of the diagram, where informal learning takes place. This is where the voluntary sector is akin to the civil society. The benefits of the voluntary activities became known and appreciated by the state and enjoyed regular funding 1947 (Edquist, 2015). When the organisers of the voluntary activities accepted subsidies they also had to

accept certain regulations for their organisations. The result is that these voluntary activities are moved to the more formal side in the model.

Figure 1: Social economy in the lifelong learning perspective (Boström, 2003)



Social capital

The concept 'social capital' has been used by researchers from different disciplines. For example it was used by Putnam in political science (Putnam, 1995; 2000), Coleman in educational sociology (Coleman, 1971; 1988; 1990) and Fukuyama in economic history and sociology (Fukuyama, 1995; 2000). For most theorists, social capital is defined in terms of networks, norms and trust, and the way these allow agents and institutions to be more effective in achieving common objectives. Social capital is generally understood as a matter of relationships, as a property of groups rather than the property of individuals (Schuller *et al.*, 2004; Onyx & Bullen, 2000).

According to Coleman (1988; 1990), social capital is not to be regarded as a single entity. The most important elements of the concept of social capital are trust, communications, norms and structure. These features can be found simultaneously in any context where individuals are working towards a common goal, one that is recognized as worthy and worthwhile by the group as a whole. Hence, social capital may be nurtured and developed through co-operation between individuals.

Further, social capital is found both at micro levels, in the form of personal relationships between people and in democratic societies, at macro levels (Putnam, 1993). Social capital as a concept has been used in connection to wellbeing (OECD, 2001).

Wellbeing

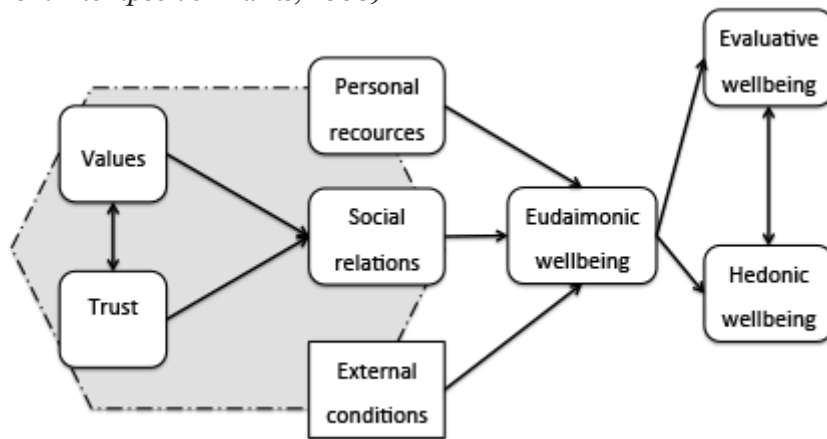
There are different definitions of wellbeing but the definition that will be used here is the same as the World Health Organization (1997) defined quality of life:

An individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationships to salient features of their environment. (ibid. p 3)

The third wave of Eurofund's European Quality of Life Survey (European Commission, 2013) was conducted in 2011-2012. The report goes beyond the use of reported life satisfaction to consider a full range of subjective wellbeing, including *hedonic* well-being (short-term feelings), *eudaimonic* wellbeing (how people are functioning in their lives) and satisfaction with different aspects of life. The results showed that face-to-face contact with friends had a strong impact on wellbeing, while indirect contact (by phone or email) had almost no impact. The strongest predictors of wellbeing were material deprivation, health, work-life balance and lack of time, and satisfaction with public services. Wellbeing as a concept is cited as early as 1993 in the Treaty on the European Union (European Commission, 2013). However, it was not until 2006 that it began to appear more explicitly in EU policy rhetoric, when the European Sustainable Development Strategy cited the wellbeing of present and future generations as its central objective (European Commission, 2013). In response, Eurostat commissioned work in 2007 (European Commission, 2013) to scope the feasibility of wellbeing indicators at the European level. In recent years attention has begun to move from the measurement of wellbeing to its use to inform policy, a process that includes this report (European Commission, 2013).

- The framework for conceptualizing subjective wellbeing and its three main aspects – *hedonic* wellbeing, *evaluative* wellbeing and *eudaimonic* wellbeing has been adapted to include social capital by the author adapted from Thompson and Marks, 2008. (Boström, 2014), see Figure 2.
- Hedemonic wellbeing refers to people's day-to-day feelings and moods.
- Evaluative wellbeing asks people to report how satisfied they are with their lives as a whole nowadays.
- Eudemonic wellbeing – refers to a range of concepts believed to be important to wellbeing including a sense of autonomy, relationships, meaning and self-esteem –sometimes they are understood as preconditions to wellbeing.

Figure 2: Social capital as part of wellbeing (Boström, 2014, adapted from Thompson & Marks, 2008)



The author of this paper suggests an additional component in the conceptual model of measuring wellbeing (see Figure 2). “Social relations” is part of the model and this is important for the concept model of wellbeing. Social capital as a concept involves relationships, but values, communication and trust are also important entities in the concept of social capital. Therefore, the boxes including values, trust and social relations in the model can be seen as containing the inclusive concept of social capital. This is the shaded part of the model and

shows social capital in the context of wellbeing. This model illustrates the idea that social capital is connected to the perspectives of 'external conditions' and 'personal resources' held by the individual.

Popular education

Popular education, folkbildning in Swedish, is regarded as an example of democracy and social equality in action in Sweden. Edquist (2015) has undertaken an analysis of Swedish popular education from 1911 to 1991 and gives the historical background:

Popular education is –at least in political and scholarly contexts – considered a free form of education, independent of the state, and a non-hierarchical arena outside the regular public school system. In reality, popular education institutions do not always fit into that ideal, and the same can be said regarding their level of independence from the state. Government subsidies have largely shaped the size and content of these educational institutions. In 1872, owing to a parliamentary decision, folk high schools received regular funding, followed by public lectures in 1884, public libraries in 1905 and study circles in 1947 ... However, the subsidies were conditioned as a number of demands had to be filled in order to receive the funds. (Edquist 2015:74)

Edquist concludes that study circles were the most favoured of the four parts of popular education. The definition of a study circle was first defined in 1947 as “a ring of comrades for common or theoretical or practical studies over a specific subject following a pre-arranged plan” (Edquist 2015:80). Later in 1963 the definition became “a ring of comrades for common studies according to plan over a pre-specified subject or problem area” (Edquist 2015:80).

The state demanded the creation of study associations to maintain the administrative and economic organisations of study circles in 1912. Since then study circles have been an important part of adult education for older adults in Sweden (Rubensson, 1996; Laginder, Nordvall & Eriksson, 2013). Sweden has now a number of nationwide adult education associations whose activities above all comprise study circles, though they also engage in cultural activities. There are 11 adult education associations that qualify for State grants. The largest of them is the Worker's Educational Association (ABF), which accounts for

one-third of all activities. ABF belongs to the labour movement: other adult education associations are also affiliated to political or trade union movements or to popular movements, such as churches or the temperance movement.

Most people taking part in study circles are already involved in the community - for example, working in diverse voluntary associations. The study circle usually involves the participants during 10 sessions, each of about three hours, often in the evening. Participants pay a fee – even if it is inexpensive - and contribute to the coffee break often with home-made cakes. There are many different subjects, some involving quite formal learning such as language, but also cultural subjects such as knitting, painting and music.

Popular education as a part of lifelong learning has a long tradition in Sweden. As a mostly bottom-up movement there are traditions and regulations that to a greater or lesser extent have an impact on the activities. In the official report of the 1920 popular education committee, ‘free and voluntary popular education was defined as open for everyone regardless of class and educational background’ (Edquist 2015:81) and it was stressed that popular education aimed at ‘grown-ups’ and was different from comprehensive school.

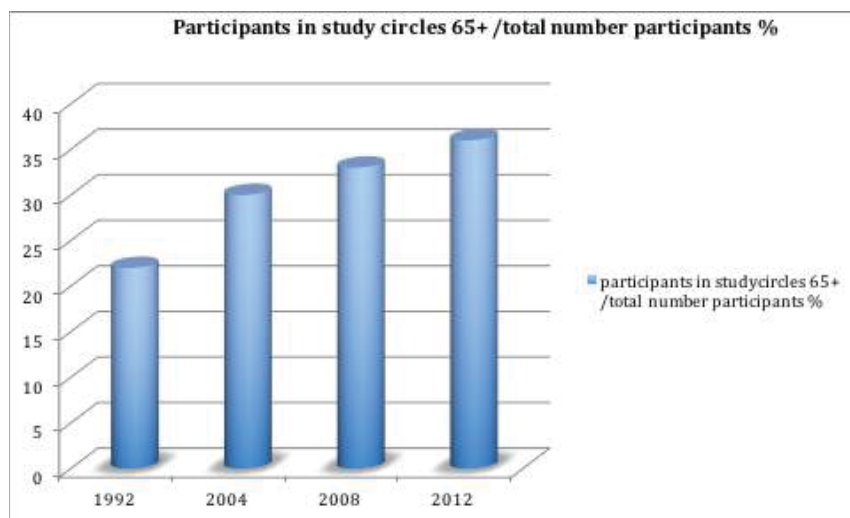
Evaluation of study circles

There is now substantial evaluation of popular education available in Sweden (Andersson *et al.*, 2014) and it is possible to identify what people age 65+ years think of the learning of knowledge and skills that takes place. The 2012 evaluation sought to answer these questions based on national data bases, focus group interviews and a survey involving study circle participants who were 65 years old or more. In the study circles, 36 per cent were older (at least 65 years old), which means that over a quarter of a million older Swedish people participated in study circles in 2012, 70 per cent of whom were women. The proportion of study circle participants in the age 65+ years has increased steadily over the last twenty years. Sweden has a population of almost 10 million people, of whom 19 per cent or around 1.9 million people are 65+ and of these 18 per cent or about 340,000 participate annually in study circles. Two-thirds of these older study circle participants were found in study circles organised by ABF and Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan, which organizes courses for organisations for retired people.

Educational level

The background and educational level varies among older participants in study circles. About three out of 10 had not completed upper secondary education and about four out of 10 had only two or three years of upper secondary education. Of the participants 65 and over who took part in study circles during 2004, 55 per cent were women. Four years later the percentage of women participating was 65 per cent. For study circle participants aged 65+, study circles have an important function of enabling them to be able to study in a systematic way. Many participants in study circles had not previously had many opportunities to study. Study circles can therefore compensate for deficiencies in schooling.

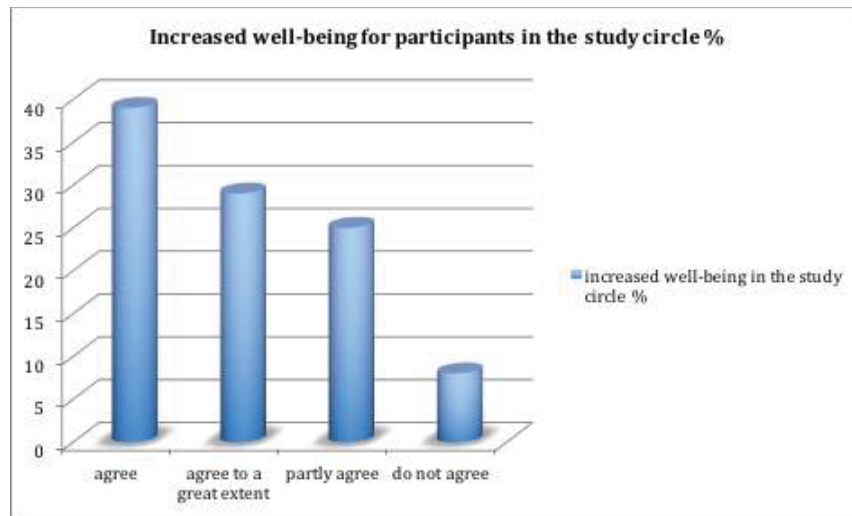
Figure 3: Proportion of participants in study circles 65+ (from Andersson *et al.*, 2014)



In popular education, *folkbildning* in Swedish, there are clear historically entrenched ideas and motives for supporting activities that benefit culture and democracy. Popular education therefore has a role to play both at the individual and the societal level in Sweden. The evaluation (Andersson *et al.*, 2014) summarizes the state's objectives in that these institutions focus on contributing to increasing the opportunity of all citizens to participate in various aspects of social life

on an equal and democratic basis. It was found in Andersson et al., 2014 that study circle participants aged 65+ voted in elections to a greater extent (90%) than the same group in the population as a whole (84%).

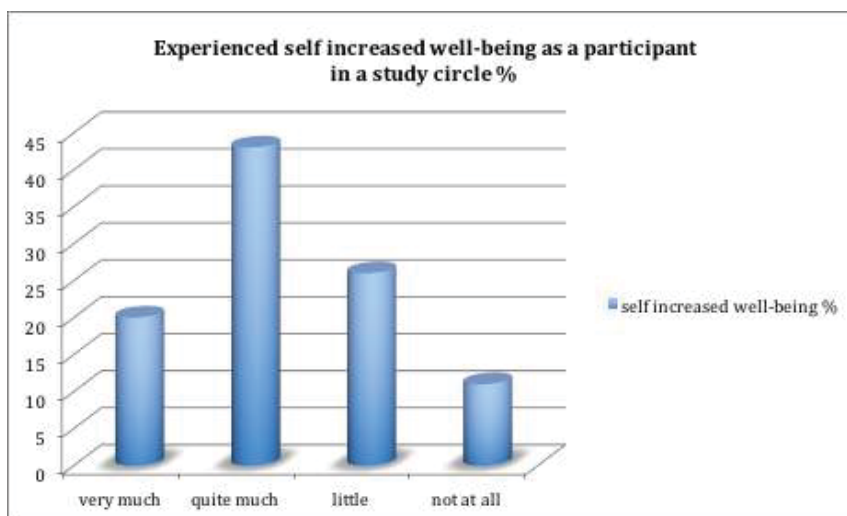
Figure 4: Increased wellbeing for participants in study circles, (from Andersson et al., 2014)



Andersson *et al.*'s (2014) study also showed that study circle participation often led to increased feelings of happiness and wellbeing (90% agreement) and that some people felt more confident as persons (25% agreement).

Many study circle participants also believed that circle participation made them better at working together (30% agreement) and better at listening (40% agreement), skills that can be said to strengthen their ability to be active citizens. Two-thirds of the older study circle participants stated that their study circle participation, regardless of the subject, had positively influenced their creativity. Two thirds of the participants felt that there was increased social capital in the study circle since they were working toward a common goal and had good social relations within the group. This often expanded to new relationships and friendships after the end of the study circle.

Figure 5: Proportion of study skills participants who experienced self-increased wellbeing (from Andersson *et al.*, 2014)



The study circle experience is seen in Andersen *et al.*'s (2014) study as largely positive. Most study circle participants aged 65+ felt that they had gained knowledge and skills, increased their social network and had participated in meaningful activities.

Knitting circles

Recently there is a new type of study circle taking place in Sweden. It is called the 'knitting circle' or knitting café. In Sweden knitting circles or knitting cafés are developing all over the country. Participants meet in a wide range of locations. It could be locations including bars, cafés, libraries and knitting shops. Those who enjoy knitting go to a meeting that is flexible without a participant register or participant fee. In Sweden some knitting courses are constructed as study circles but there are over 50 other knitting cafes whose details are published on the internet - many of them on the Tant-bloggen website (Tantbloggen, 2016). There is some recent research about knitting and its impact on individuals as well as on the social setting of several persons participating in a knitting group.

Rosner and Ryokai (2008) conducted interviews with 17 knitters. Six central themes were identified in their analysis. Most knitters

considered their craft portable and they could knit in a variety of places. They worked both on small projects and large pieces that take a longer time. They were mainly motivated either by making a gift for someone or doing something according to the weather. Knitters not only enjoy the product of their activity; they also enjoy the process. In Rosner and Ryokai's (2008) study, knitters wrote down notes on paper to record how they had made their projects and the knitting activities that took place in both personal and social space.

Knitting provides people with opportunities to socialize with others. At the same time, knitting and crochet have a calming effect and create a "relaxation response" for the individual, that can help manage anxiety and may even help conditions such as an asthma or panic attacks (Corkhill *et al.*, 2014). Riley, Corkhill and Morris (2013) undertook a global online survey about knitting. They achieved a total valid response of 3,514 from 31 countries worldwide. The respondents were asked to list their four main reasons for knitting. They identified perceived psychological benefits that came from the process of knitting, such as relaxation, stress relief, and its therapeutic and meditative qualities. Knitting helped them feel productive at the same time being an outlet for creativity. The knitters also felt calm after the soothing rhythm of the repetitive motion. Knitting in a group was also perceived as encouraging further skill acquisition, both knitting skills and other transferable skills like learning new patterns using reading and counting and learning social awareness of other participants in the group. Attending a group enhanced knitting work as an individual activity. Knitting enabled the introvert to feel more comfortable in a group setting. The knitting group also provided a level playing ground where those disadvantaged and advantaged in life could meet as relative equals.

The benefits of study circles and knitting circles

Study circles can contribute to the wellbeing of the individual both in terms of hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing as well as by an increased social capital in their social relationships in groups. The same could be said about knitting and the knitting cafes. While study circles seem to be a system that fits the Nordic countries, the knitting café can be found in several countries around the world (Riley *et al.*, 2013). The study circles have been included in the education system in Sweden, although they are not formal in the way that they give degrees and there

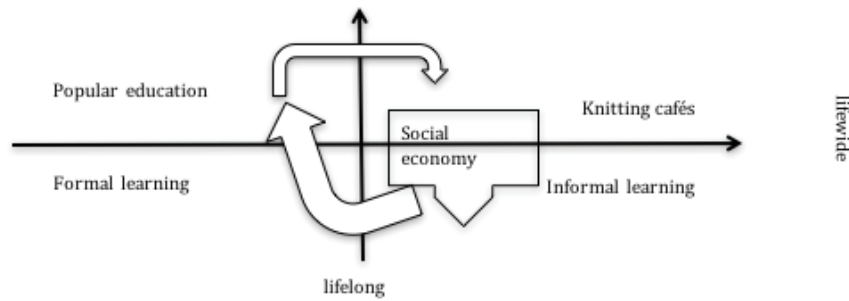
are no examinations. An example of the differences between knitting in a study circle and a knitting café are shown in Table 1. The costs are from the courses programmes from Studieförbundet vuxenskolan, Folkuniversitetet and Medborgarskolan (2017). Varberg is a small town on the west coast and Stockholm is the capital of Sweden. The example of the yarn shop is from Stockholm (Garnverket, 2017). The study circles have a participant cost (Swedish krona, SEK) and are organized for the registered participants during specific times while the knitting café is open for all and free of cost.

Table 1: *Difference between knitting in a study circle and participating in a knitting café*

	Varberg	Stockholm	Yarn shop	Knitting café in yarn shop
Cost in SEK	850	A) 940 B) 1050	350-2350	0
Time	Three hours/ five weeks	A) Four hours/one week B) Five hours/two weeks	Two and a half hours/ five weeks	Open twice a month/two hours
Participant register	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

The study circle could be found on the left side of the model of social economy because their organizations and structure is regulated to a certain extent (see Figure 6). The knitting cafés, on the other hand, are not regulated in any way so these can be found to the right side of the model. This illustrates the tension between the idealized popular education and the organized popular education in practice.

Figure 6: Popular education and knitting cafés in the social economy.



By his analysis of the popular education, Edquist (2015) found that a tension had developed between two parallel notions of popular education. One was the idealised popular education that stresses non-formal learning and independence. The other was the organised popular education – that receives state subsidies and adapts to state regulations.

Discussion

The rhetoric surrounding lifelong learning policy suggests that all forms of education and learning should receive equal attention of education and learning. In the case of Sweden the focus was, from the beginning, on adult learning (Husén, 1968), especially non-formal vocational education and learning. During the 1990s national policy documents were directed toward pre-school and afterschool care. The Swedish Education System has been through a difficult period with falling academic results both in literacy and mathematics and the shifting interest towards compulsory schooling. This has led to a major evaluation of the Swedish educational evaluation system (OECD, 2013). As study circles are a part of the educational system, they were also evaluated (Andersson *et al.*, 2014).

Lifelong learning in practice has shown benefits for society in the form of increased wellbeing in study circles and in knitting cafés. The tension between “ideal” study circles and “organisational” study circles that Edquist (2015) found is still a reality in the Swedish society, as the funding forces adult education associations to organise the study circles according to the state regulations. It remains to be seen if the knitting

cafés will keep their independence or if there will be a movement towards organised forms of these circles too.

Conclusion

This paper examined the Swedish education system with a special focus on popular education and study circles. The tension between the organisational study circles as more formal and bureaucratic and the knitting cafés that are to a greater extent informal and independent, has been described. Still, participants of both kinds of circles enjoy increased wellbeing and social capital and the circles are open to all participants, helping to counteract social inequalities and encouraging possibilities of learning in later life.

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