Organising special education support in adult education

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Abstract

In municipal adult education (MAE), adults are offered a second chance to complete secondary or upper secondary studies. This article examines how special educational support was organised within MAE in a Swedish municipality, focusing on students' needs, the learning environment, and the resources available to teachers. It highlights the diverse needs of adult learners and how the physical learning environment interacts with teachers' interpretations of those needs. Actor-network theory (ANT) serves as the theoretical framework, with the concept of translation guiding the analysis. Semi-structured group interviews with teachers and special educational needs teachers were conducted repeatedly during the first year of a three-year project on special needs education. The findings identify three translations of support: pedagogic group-oriented collegial learning, special educational individual-oriented support, and health promotion in a student health team. The article discusses dilemmas related to who receives support, who provides it, and where it can occur.

Keywords: special education, adult education, actor-network theory, immigrants

Introduction

Adult education can be the key to securing employment and gaining social belonging in Sweden (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019). In municipal adult education (MAE) (*komvux*), adults are given a second chance to complement their secondary or upper secondary studies. The need for various types of support within MAE in Sweden is recognised, as these students often have a history of school failure or other difficulties. The educational path also

includes courses for adults who want to change professions, and education in Swedish for immigrants (*svenska för invandrare*, SFI).

In adult education, the physical learning environment interacts with teachers' interpretations of students' needs. This could influence how education is organised in regular classrooms or in smaller settings. However, if students are struggling, in Sweden there is no government policy that guarantees student support in MAE (SFS 2010:800).

Swedish research about adult education shows that privatisation and significant variations in implementation have been identified as areas of risk, keeping students from achieving their goals. Policy concepts such as quality, individualisation, and flexibility are presented as solutions to heterogeneous student composition (Andersson & Muhrman, 2024; Holmqvist, 2022; Mufic & Fejes, 2020). Increased government requirements for self-provision place demands not only on individuals but also on adult education to meet the needs of those furthest from the labour market and with the greatest needs.

The aim of the article is to explore how special education support was organised at a specific MAE in a municipality in Sweden, considering students' needs, as well as the learning environment and the resources available to teachers. The MAE had experienced an increased workload, with more students who required extra support. The MAE enacted an educational initiative in collaboration with the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (*Specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten*, SPSM), meant to increase the number of students that completed their education. A student health project was designed to develop special educational measures meet these challenges and increase the number of students who pass requirements and qualify for the next level of schooling. A research project was launched to follow the student health project and to monitor the progress of building support for adult learners. The improvements were expected to take place within the existing physical learning environments, with the addition of one special education needs teacher and a half-time extension of the counselling service. No other extra resources were assigned the project.

We are interested in how adult education is organised in light of the various needs of students in adult education. Accordingly, we focus on how the learning environment interacts with teachers' interpretations of students' needs. In interviews with teachers and special educational needs teachers (SEN teachers), we explored learning environments' impact on the organised support and teachers' reasoning regarding what types of support students need. To explore the interaction between the learning environment and the teachers' interpretations of students' needs, we adopted actor-network theory (ANT) (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005). ANT analyses focus on processes in interactions between material and human actors, emphasising a general symmetry between them. Physical learning environments are material actors, which are considered equally as important as human actors. Students' needs are also considered as an actor, including aspects of their health in taking part in and influence the interaction. The following research questions were utilised:

1. How were the problems and students' needs formulated in the network of actors?
2. What solutions appeared possible in relation to students' needs and resources, such as teachers, special educational needs teachers, and the physical learning environment?
3. What support was produced and influenced by the interaction between material and human actors?

Municipal adult education in Sweden

Adult education can be organised at several levels. For example, adult education can be organised by municipalities (MAE) (Holmqvist, 2022). MAE are often designed for basic education or Swedish for immigrants (SFI). This study focuses on MAE, including SFI, in a municipality located in a small municipality (25,000 residents).

It is possible to obtain various degrees, from secondary school to upper secondary school degrees, at a MAE. In SFI, immigrant students are sorted into three different study paths, 1-3, and four different courses, A-D (National Agency for Education, 2022), depending on prior knowledge and the rate at which the teaching can be carried out. This means that those who have had previous education and those who are expected to learn a new language quickly go into one group. Those with a very limited educational background or who are illiterate go into another group.

Special education support in adult education

Previous international studies have paid some attention to special education as part of adult education. This section focuses on studies that intersect these two areas. The studies described below focus on special and adult education. They describe:

(1) compensatory measures,
(2) the specific needs of adult learners, such as those with learning disabilities, and
(3) the democratic necessity of schooling

It is common to view special education as a compensatory measure. Adult education can be described as part of an emancipatory, transformative process (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015; Kump & Krašovec, 2007). This includes arguing for adult education to be organised in a way that could provide disadvantaged groups with an opportunity to improve their situation and access education. This line of argument is common in Sweden (Holmqvist, 2022). In that type of argumentation, adult education in and of itself serves as a compensatory measure for previous school failures, lack of schooling (Gerber, 2012; Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015), or structural inequalities (Holmqvist, 2022).

Groups with specific challenges are commonly addressed as the people benefitting from the organisation of adult education, with their needs in focus (Díez-Palomar et al., 2021) – for example, people with reading difficulties (Gerber, 2012; Greenberg & Perin, 2023; Mellard & Becker Patterson, 2008). In addition, having access to schooling was described in a Spanish study as a prerequisite for being able to engage in a democratic society (Díez-Palomar et al., 2021). When considering the nature of special education in adult education, Price and Shaw (2000) ask 'why are we still viewing them as children?' (p. 187) in relation to American adult students with learning disabilities. They argue that adults and children with special educational needs (SEN) have a similar need for variation and individualised support, but also argue that the specific situations of adult SEN students must be considered. Adult learners have other engagements to consider, make choices as adults, and might have personal and family issues that take up attention in the present. In a Swedish context, in some cases, adult learners must also attend school to have access to social services, which increases the demands placed on the quality of education. Here, Fejes and Dahlstedt (2023) highlight the importance of the quality of adult education. In their study, students were highly motivated, engaged in their education, and had teachers eager to support them, despite many structural problems.

Papadopoulos (2023) authored a literature review with the aim of identifying individualising processes in adult education in Sweden. The review problematised individualisation, due to the tensions that were created between liberation and responsibility. Papadopoulous (2023) demonstrated that the process of individualisation could mitigate the risk of exclusion and address student diversity in order to solve problems identified in adult education. To amend this, Båtevik (2019) concludes that all adult education should be engaged in measures to have students complete formal qualifications through a flexible education system. In special education, a flexible system could mean having a SEN teacher and a teacher cooperating in the classroom, utilising their professional competencies directly related to teaching through flexible teaching (Sundqvist et al., 2014).

In conclusion, all adult education could be seen as special education if it is understood as compensating for people's differences, and as engaging in emancipatory ideals and a needs-based form of equity (Belzer & Ross Gordon, 2011), instead of as one-size-fits-all education.

Theoretical framework

Actor-network theory (ANT) was adopted as the overarching theoretical framework, due to the focus on what can be produced in a network through interactions between actors (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Latour, 2005). Both humans and material (the environment) are useful in studying how special education needs influence interaction and produce support in adult education. In ANT, support is understood as being produced in networks in which materiality is equally as important as humans. ANT has increasingly become a popular theory in the field of educational science. Fenwick et al. (2011), who advocated for the use of ANT in the discipline of education, explain this trend by suggesting that ANT offers a useful conceptual framework that captures the ambivalent and often contradictory elements inherent in the various ways education is organised. The need for adaptability and new avenues for action is highlighted as reasons for the growing interest in ANT. ANT allows, for example, the examination of education as different networks that draw attention to 'the multiple overlapping worlds that may be lashed together as temporary stabilizations in the process' (Fenwick et al., 2011, p. 95).

The analysis is guided by the concept of translation (Callon, 1986). Interaction occurs in four moments to create an actor-network, and these moments collectively form what he calls a 'translation'. In this article, the concept of translation refers to network processes in which different forms of support emerge in teacher- and SEN teacher interviews. The four moments in a translation are called problematisation, interessement, enrolment, and mobilisation. The first moment (1), problematisation, involves actors beginning to find a common reason for coming together in a network. The second moment in a translation (2), interessement, refers to the process through which collective interest in the interaction is made relevant for all actors so the interaction can continue. Interessement is crucial for creating stability in the network, allowing it to gather and hold together. Enrolment (3) is the third moment in a translation, and is about how different actors are assigned and offered various roles, which can be accepted, modified, or rejected. The actors begin to act according to the roles that become possible within the network. The fourth moment (4), is called mobilisation and involves stabilising the network so that it becomes sufficiently enduring and lasts long enough for the interaction to spread.

In a translation process, the question of materiality influences all four moments (Callon 1986). These four moments serve as important analytical tools for understanding

what is collectively produced in constant state of change. In an analysis, the moments can help us see what happens in a network; what makes it hold together or start to dissolve? The learning environment's connections to other actors are crucial for highlighting the problems, interessements, roles, and for determining the direction in which the network is heading.

Method

A qualitative design was adopted, including semi-structured group interviews with teachers and SEN teachers at the beginning and the end of a year of fieldwork at an MAE including SFI.

Data collection and participants

The MAE had approximately 900 students, with about 300 students studying to obtain new qualifications, and 600 students in the different study paths of SFI. In SFI, every fifth week, new immigrant students joined the ongoing groups, meeting others who were already active. Students at SFI can also take part in activities in a workplace for half of the day and study for the other half of the day. The MAE also had a student health team. A student health team is an interprofessional team, and at this MAE, the team is comprised of counsellors, SEN teachers, and school leaders. This organising is mandated in compulsory school and secondary education, but not in adult education and MAE (SFS 2010:800). At this MAE, they had a special unit called 'the Attic' where students received individual help from a SEN teacher.

The first author carried out the fieldwork and conducted the interviews. In total, 13 group interviews – 3-4 teachers each – were conducted with 27 teachers at the beginning and 23 teachers at the end of the field study. Every teacher that wanted to participate was included, and teachers of Swedish as a second language and subject teachers in math, Swedish, English, and civics participated. In addition, SEN teachers were interviewed. Similarities in subject matter governed the composition of groups. Participants were chosen to be interviewed because of their interactions with the students, their familiarity with the needs they frequently witnessed, and how these experiences influenced how they described the support that could be produced in this material setting. The group interviews took place in classrooms and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The fact that group interviews were chosen meant that opinions could be discussed and probed using follow-up questions. Although group interviews might have enabled participants to continue their discussion, there was also a risk that contrasting ideas would be avoided. The teachers had worked together for a long time and seemed able to speak their minds freely. The interview guide focused on how teachers worked to ensure that as many learners as possible reached their goals, what they were already doing, and what they thought needed to be developed. Other areas that were highlighted included collaboration with the student health team, what places and competencies should be used or employed in teaching, including classrooms or in specialised units. It also included what learning material could be used, and focused on the role of the SEN teacher in adult education.

Data analyses

In the analyses, we used four analytical questions corresponding to the four moments of translation to identify different kinds of efforts taking place in the MAE to improve

student achievement. These guiding questions were: (1) how are the problems formulated, (2) why is this important, (3) how are actors invited and involved, and (4) what kind of support is produced? To explore the formulated problems, we set out to discuss the interviews and elaborate upon the analyses, gathering excerpts to depict how the participants described different problems, and the solution associated with each problem. After this, we gathered these in problem-solution clusters, and the analyses continued. From the clusters, we explored different problematisations, interessements, enrolments, and mobilisations (i.e., translations), understood as different special education support. Each problem-solution cluster describes the human and material actors and how they are connected, what problem the actors are trying to address, what their priorities are, where the support takes place, rooms, and materials. Finally, we focused on what kind of support was formulated (see Table 1). Together, the result depicts different special education support networks and how adult education works to help push students through the system.

Table 1. Analytical steps of the study (authors' own table)

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Questions explored in the material: 1) how are the problems formulated, (2) why is this important, (3) how are actors invited and involved, and (4) what kind of support is produced?	Gathering problem-solution clusters.	Formulating three translations of support.
Coding material and gathering excerpts.	Connecting clusters to interessements, enrolments, and mobilisations, and to human and material actors.	Describing and writing up the results.

Ethical considerations

We have followed the guidelines for good research practice as stipulated by the Swedish Research Council (2024). Consent was obtained from participants during the interview sessions, and they were informed that participation was voluntary. The results are presented in a way that cannot be traced back to the individual, but some information will inevitably be known at the group level. This was clarified before the interviews. Information was provided continuously about the right to decline participation.

Findings: three translations of support in adult education

Each section of the presentation on different types of support includes the four moments of translation previously described. The findings show three translations of support in adult education in relation to the interaction between human and material actors. These are: 1) pedagogic group-oriented collegial learning, 2) special educational individual-oriented support, and 3) health promotion in a student health team.

Pedagogic group-oriented collegial learning

The first translation formulated was *pedagogic group-oriented collegial learning.* This translation was mainly about teachers who taught in the physical space of mainstream classrooms for the whole group, where some students had special education needs. The problematisation of this translation was formulated as teaching large groups of students, some of whom have individual difficulties such as trauma or ADHD, which challenged teachers' competence. Since the student population was diverse, teachers needed to develop their skills to meet the challenges that come with teaching students in the mainstream classroom, which is a material actor. However, it was a bit unclear as to what types of skills were required. There was also some uncertainty in the teachers' answers about which students to prioritise, which was especially evident when it was linked to requirements to increase the school's achievement level in terms of students finishing their studies. A teacher in SFI recounted:

> What is difficult is knowing which students I should prioritise? What students should I give extra help, and whom should I prioritise? Those who are close, close, close to the course targets and almost there. Or those who are far from reaching the requirements, they need more help and have poorer language? Maybe I'm making the wrong prioritisation, but I must make room for others. We also have a queue. I need room for others. (SFI teacher 1)

The teacher found it difficult to know who to prioritise for support and addressed the issue of not having enough material resources to help all SFI students progress in their studies. The SEN teacher in SFI often prioritised those closest to the goals. SFI saw an increase in the number of SEN teachers, with one more employee joining the team. In the second interview, where both SEN teachers and regular teachers participated, this reinforcement was taken up and the discussion about both working methods and prioritising students continued:

> I have not experienced that anything happened when I sent students to XX (name of SEN teacher). Does it help to send someone once a week with our adult students? In Swedish school policy, you must invest in the poorest learners, and that was part of SPSM education [an education from the National Agency for Special Education, authors' note], and we have learned about different diagnoses, but this is true for very few. Why not engage with the vast majority of student without diagnoses? Learning a new language is difficult. Engage with that instead of the worst cases. (SFI Teacher 2)

This quote reflects an important discussion about whether the 'worst cases' fall under the responsibility of the subject teacher, and what has the greatest impact on most students. Here, Swedish tradition of special education offering support to the students furthest away from the requirements, mainly outside the mainstream classroom (Hjörne, 2018), counteracts the strong connections and cooperation between the SFI teacher and the SEN teacher. These different views on who to prioritise weakened the network. In the quote, the preference was to orient into general interventions for the whole group and support those closest to achieving their educational goals and becoming employable, not giving direct support to only a few students who were experiencing severe difficulties engaging in the teaching. The material actor of resources and regular classrooms enabled this translation.

Within study path three, the fast study path in SFI, the teachers had managed to organise the work so that two teachers worked together in the classroom. None of them were SEN teachers. Working methods had been developed where collegial learning was

aimed at creating a common value base without involving SEN teachers. A teacher in SFI explained how to create a common foundation to stand on through collegial learning:

> Our concept is peer tutoring [between teachers, authors' note]. There are always two of us in each group and we have organised the schedule, so we have planning times and such. Our team only has 15 teaching hours. We have scheduled planning hours approved by the principal. We do everything together and develop together and try to think more individually [about students, authors' note]. (SFI Teacher 3)

Peer tutoring between subject teachers as a form of collegial learning was something that mattered to teachers in managing the whole student group in the classroom. A teacher offered an illustration:

> We try our way. There are different solutions; this week I've worked with a morning group, then I've taken them up front, so they've had to practice a little more individually. A little reading comprehension and a little writing, and it's a better opportunity to talk when there aren't as many. (subject teacher 1)

In this way of organising support, the role of SEN teachers was rather invisible, and instead, the subject teachers assisted each other. This teaching advice was intended to be implemented in the classroom. The subject teachers were not used to being instructed by the SEN teacher. A SEN teacher said:

> They [the teachers, authors note] must have the tools. I can think of some teachers who come up and talk and then try something new in their classrooms. I have time when I'm not teaching [individuals, authors' note], but then I'm supposed to conduct investigations, attend meetings, provide guidance.
> Interviewer: Don't you think you could provide group guidance sessions, like 'Thursdays at 3pm, can you come?'
> SEN teacher: We haven't done that. (SEN teacher 1)

In some respects, the action that was initially mobilised in the project was two subject teachers helping each other, instead of cooperation between a SEN teacher and a subject teacher. In this translation of preferred special education support, the group-oriented efforts in the ordinary classroom were directed towards mainstream teaching supported by collegial learning between subject teachers. What emerged as a problem in this translation is the number of students, demands to push as many students as possible through the system, and whom to prioritise. The efforts were not initially aimed at improving collaboration between subject teachers and SEN teachers to increase subject teachers' knowledge about students with ADHD, autism, or PTSD to better understand individual students' needs. The subject teachers instead helped each other, as they had no other place to be than in the classroom.

Special educational individual-oriented support

The second translation of support we explored – *special educational individual-oriented support* – was mainly about how best to meet students' individual needs in special units; a material actor. There was a total of three SEN teachers at the MAE, working with several hundred students. They believed group-oriented work described in the previous section was important, but they also argued that some students needed a more individual-oriented approach in smaller rooms. The problem was students' learning difficulties. This included

interventions by one of the SEN teachers that were held in a quieter place than the mainstream classroom.

> To a certain extent, group-oriented efforts [towards teachers, authors' note] work, but sometimes the work must be directed at the individual. We meet so many special people, you can't escape the need to have special skills and of meeting the individual's needs. (SEN teacher 2)

The process in this network was about translating the need to work with a SEN teacher in a special unit, which also served as a material actor. This way of supporting students was a traditional individual-oriented translation well-known in the discipline of special education. The methods focused on investigating students' individual needs and compensating for their difficulties through individual efforts. The problem was formulated around the complexity of students and the great need for teaching expertise compared to available resources. This was thought to be best organised outside the mainstream classroom. A problematisation emerged regarding fears of an increasing number of students with special needs asking for individual special education in a smaller, quieter room. One of the SEN teachers who worked in the special teaching group called 'the Attic' said:

> We have too many people who want to come. We used to inform [people about the Attic], but now we are terrified of doing so. There is almost a need for the whole of MAE to become like the Attic. (SEN teacher 1)

The secluded environment in the Attic included strong connections between SEN teachers and students in need of individual support, reinforced by the fact that they also had their own place and materials. This strong network resulted in many students wanting to be taught at the Attic. The problem in this translation was that the SEN teachers were too few, the Attic was not big enough, and SFI did not have this special unit at all.

A similar setting was planned for implementation at SFI, using the Attic as a material model. It was called 'the Studio' and was intended to be available for more student-directed activity. This could involve students getting support in interpreting instructions, sometimes because of their lack of proficiency in Swedish. The students who came to the Studio did not necessarily have any identified learning difficulties besides the need to proficiently master the Swedish language. The Studio attempt was not working successfully, according to some teachers:

> A subject teacher is needed (in the Studio) to help with the core subjects. Then we would reach several students who do not have difficulties, but think it is difficult to study at home. The Studio holds 20 people, but it is not used. There are different uses of the Studio at different times. A couple of times a week there are math and English students, but there are no teachers. If I had my wish, it would be staffed all day and twice a week in the evenings and have a career adviser – always someone there. Easily accessible, structured, organised, subject-oriented, and someone to talk to when the going gets tough. They may not have difficulties suitable for the Attic, but they need to be in school. (subject teacher 2)

In the quote above, it appears that subject teachers were missing at the Studio. Despite the lack of subject teachers, the interviewed teacher still thought it was a good idea to have such a material actor at the school. Despite good intentions, the Studio did not include subject teachers' voluntary engagement at that location. Subject teachers remained in their classrooms, taking responsibility for mainstream education. The strong connection found in enrolments between SEN teachers and the students taught in the Attic

was not present between subject teachers and students in relation to the Studio. The Studio network was not thriving because subject teachers found it meaningless to go there.

SEN teachers from the Attic did not work in the Studio either. The interviews expressed a division into different roles linked to different places. Because of the increasing number of students in need of special support, previous roles become unsustainable. New alternatives were being explored. A newly recruited SEN teacher at SFI said:

> But if there is a person full-time who is always there [in the Studio, authors' note], and then subject teachers come and complement with their expertise, it would be even better, so to speak. (SEN teacher 3)

A need to create opportunities and places for interactions between students and subject teachers outside the classroom emerged. It became particularly apparent for students who, in the eyes of SEN teachers, did not quite fit into their view of students with special educational needs. Subject teachers, teachers in SFI, and SEN teachers, all had specific tasks in specific locations with different learning materials, and the differences in the teachers' assignments appeared significant in the interviews. In the translation of special needs support as individual-oriented, the problem was not a lack of competence among the SEN teachers. Instead, the problem was not having places available for meeting with all the individuals outside of the classrooms. Even if there was such a place ready, the connections between the actors and the new site, the Studio, were not strong enough to hold the network together. The Attic was already full, but the Studio was empty.

Health promotion in a student health team

A third kind of support, *health promotion in a student health team,* emerged in the analysis, focusing on students' learning problems resulting from health problems. In this network, the student health team (social counsellor, academic advisers, SEN teachers, and the principal all meeting in a conference room) included important actors. Subject teachers could make a referral to the student health team. During the project, this network was strengthened with a SEN teacher working in SFI, and a social counsellor was upgraded from part-time to full-time. The role of the social counsellor had so far been to inform and guide students regarding visits to, for example, healthcare centres, the employment agency, or the social insurance office.

The referral system was a material actor where subject teachers could bring up various students that concerned the SEN teacher. Due to the scarcity of SEN teachers and the aforementioned lack of space, there was concern among the team about how the expectations of subject teachers were met.

> Yes, then I can imagine collaborating with a social counsellor, but we also need SEN teachers, especially in SFI. I think like this, okay, now maybe we'll get a lot of cases [referred] to the student health team, and it turns out they have special needs, and what do we do then? (SEN teacher 3)

Initially, it was decided that the referral would be written up on a certain form and that the subject teacher did not need to attend the student health team meeting. To facilitate the referral, subject teachers were later asked to attend the meeting and verbally report about the student at the meeting, changing the actor related to the meeting. The referral process shifted during the field study from initially being student-focused to becoming

advisory. Subject teachers also demonstrated scepticism about what would be realistic due to the lack of resources.

> If you go out and say, 'Hello everyone' and then there's a queue because there's not enough space and resources to handle it properly. When we ['we as society', authors´ note] talk about diagnoses, we can give a diagnosis but what good does it do if we don't have resources? Because resources are limited here. (subject teacher 3)

The problems were formulated in the interviews as being about lacking the resources needed to meet all students' individual problems. The problems were not formulated as teaching problems or as classroom interaction problems. After the teachers' education about autism, ADHD, and trauma, it is logical that there was an anticipation of the benefits of focusing on these issues.

> I find such conversations a bit difficult if, for example, I suspect that a student needs an assessment where I suspect Asperger's [high-functioning autism, authors' note]. Then the student can talk to the social counsellor, and she can, for example, contact health services [outside adult education, authors´ note]. I don't have access to anything like that. Difficult cases that we can't handle in class and can't take a comprehensive approach to may be referred to other forms of assistance. (subject teacher 4)

The teacher felt relieved to know that the student can be referred to other expert authorities, but the referral actor did not solve these learning problems in the mainstream classroom. The student health team, whose referral procedures were being developed with an emphasis on increased collaboration between teachers and SEN teachers, was battling against the expertise of the network's translation of medicalising the problems.

The previous collaboration with SEN teachers in the MAE had been able to offer flexibility and quicker facilitation when working outside the team. Within the more formalised student health team, the material actor consisted of more rigid paperwork processes with meetings every fortnight and submission of written student cases well in advance. One SEN teacher was asked about the changes.

> Interviewer: How do you deal with this change now? Do you tell the teachers to go to the student health team?
> SEN teacher: No, we don't. There has been no change since the student health team started. The Attic decides who comes to the Attic. (SEN teacher 1)

The SEN teachers had been able to respond quickly, and, when necessary, provide advice, but this had also meant that consultation with the student health team was left out. They had been able to decide which students they should focus on, and which students were admitted to the Attic. The SEN teachers also saw their main task as teaching students with special needs rather than mentoring their fellow teachers.

When students are defined as having problems in need of social support from a social counsellor or medical professional, or other interventions from external actors, the problematisation strays far from teaching and support for subject teachers in the classroom. There is also no 'matching' professional role for teachers to take on within this problematisation. Based on how the problems are formulated, the solution is not always directed towards classroom teaching; instead, student health becomes the route to external actors, such as primary care or health services. Some teachers had significant doubts about the usefulness of the student health team concerning mainstream classroom teaching:

> Student health work is only partially linked to higher goal achievement. Research on which surveys were conducted with teachers shows that it is impossible to achieve better results if teachers do not have time to plan and follow up on lessons, and that time is unavailable. (SFI Teacher 4)

The teacher pointed out the uncertainty over whether interventions truly help students achieve their learning goals in adult education. The teacher suggested that what would improve results was if there was more time available for lesson planning and evaluative reflections. Consequently, the translation of special support organised as a student health team can help students, but does not change classroom teaching.

Discussion

The findings could be described as priority dilemmas in organising support, where different needs and aspects stand in opposition to each other (Guvå & Hylander, 2012). For example, the teachers and SEN teachers' reasoning about possible priorities addressed whether the support focus on: 1) individual teaching in special units or mainstream classroom teaching; 2) health promotion or educational goals; or 3) the students close to reaching their educational goals or the students furthest from those goals?

What types of students, in what place, supported by whom?

In the first part of the findings section, we presented a translation of support, whereby students were enrolled as if they were experiencing general educational difficulties and could be addressed as a group in the classroom (a material actor), despite the fact that MAE is often described as having a heterogeneous student body (Holmqvist, 2022). The setting of the flexible material actor of the Studio allowing students to choose by themselves whether they needed help, was not a success. Neither students, subject teachers, nor SEN teachers engaged in the Studio.

The second translation was more successful, where students were enrolled because they needed individualised special educational, which can be recognised from other research on how problems are addressed in adult education (Papadopoulos, 2023). Support here is individualised mainly through the use of special teaching units as a material actor. In presented adult education research, concepts such as individualisation and flexibility have been emphasised (Andersson & Muhrman, 2024; Holmqvist, 2022; Mufic & Fejes, 2020), rather than special educational categorisations such as learning or reading difficulties (Greenberg & Perin, 2023; Mellard & Becker Patterson, 2008). Concepts such as 'individualisation and flexibility' do not point out specific problems and therefore we connect them to *pedagogic group-oriented collegial learning*. Instead, the beneficiaries of special education are commonly depicted as categorising and identifying students in need of support (Nilholm, 2021), as shown in the results of *special educational individual-oriented support*.

The third translation highlighted the students' health problems as a material actor, making the student health team and a referral system important in helping individual students outside school, but left the subject teachers absent more resources. The student health team focuses on meeting diverse needs in all classrooms, and the educational efforts towards teachers therefore focus on learning difficulties because of neuropsychiatric problems or trauma to better understand the needs of the students. These results align with other research that focuses on special education and adult education

(Gerber, 2012; Greenberg & Perin, 2023; Mellard & Becker Patterson, 2008). On the other hand, this does not accommodate the need for differentiated instruction in smaller settings that the teachers acknowledge as important in *special educational individual-oriented support.* Instead, *health promotion from the student health team* focuses on the knowledge level of the group of teachers. The special education expertise that focuses on a specific type of student with neuropsychiatric problems or trauma emerges as either insufficient or as missing the target for the large number of students. When dealing with several hundred students and only two or three SEN teachers, collaboration around individual students in material settings of special teaching units does not seem to be a viable option. On the other hand, subject teachers may always experience a lack of competence, given all the possible issues that could influence adult learners. Subject teachers and SFI teachers therefore always seem to need increased instructional knowledge from the SEN teachers about differentiated teaching due to students' different needs. SEN teachers did not see their main task as providing support to subject teachers, but as providing support directly to the students outside the classroom.

Special education develops its own pigeon-holing strategy (Skrtic, 1991) when it comes to trying to engage in an organising that develops rationales as to who should be the target of education. However, the problematisation of choosing who most benefits from the teachers' efforts mobilises different kinds of support, intertwined with available human and material actors and resources, regardless of whether the 'solutions' are discussed as special education. It could be asked, what if all education in adult education instead focused on adapted speed and generally smaller groups? The material actors of the empty Studio and crowded Attic influenced possible actions, with the special educational facility in the Attic being highlighted as the real helper. As there is not enough space for everyone there, students are referred to the Studio for more flexible support, but this is rejected by teachers and students.

Who decides where and what?

Power is also produced in a translation, and decision-making power varies in different settings. In the organising of in the *pedagogic group-oriented collegial learning*, it was the groups of subject teachers who planned how to meet the students' needs in the ordinary classroom, and they had regular student reviews where no SEN teacher participated. The SEN teachers did not feel capable of organising collegial tutoring with the teachers, and therefore it was the subject teachers themselves who become responsible for collegial learning as an actor and as a means of pushing as many students as possible through the system.

In that sense, the SEN teachers were not partners in developing the teaching together with the subject teacher who Sundqvist et al. (2014) describes. Instead, they were designated to the students in need of special support and the special teaching units. The SEN teachers decided whom they let into the Attic and influenced which students could use the material actor. Nevertheless, the subject teachers initiated the idea about students being in need of support, and as such held a gatekeeper role regarding this strand of special education. Here, pigeon-holing – that is, finding someone to fit the criteria (Skrtic, 1991) – might be a consequence and a new actor set into motion.

The student health team was a newly established actor at this MAE and mirroring compulsory school. The organising approach, as outlined in *special educational individual-oriented support* involves mobilising efforts to help those with the most pronounced problems (Nilholm, 2021). With the current focus on health promotion and SEN teachers in specialised groups, there is a constant shift in responsibility for the

students. If organising is primarily a health issue, the student health team should be responsible, while a student could be considered someone else's responsibility in several other situations. Here, the subject teachers focused on the students closest to achieving the goal, and thus to being employable, rather than focusing on the students with the greatest needs.

Educational or health-related issues?

A student health team has a dual mission, addressing both educational and health issues. When there is a struggle for resources, these different needs are sometimes set against each other. The introduction of a student health team, modelled on compulsory school, could be somewhat problematic. Compulsory schools do have a compensatory role for parents that is not reflected in the legislation for MAE. In addition, it seems impossible to address these issues on an individual level with the available resources. The findings in the translation of support as *health promotion in a student health team* shows that the team wanted subject teachers to better understand student health difficulties, and helped illustrate why some student behaviours might occur in the classroom setting. Even if subject teachers were educated in diagnoses such as ADHD, autism, or trauma, the teachers described a lack of resources and places to deal with the issues related to these individual differences. They only have their classroom and possibly the corridor to use when adapting teaching more individually. When it comes to educational needs and health problems, teachers described focusing on referring students to special units or to other professionals inside or outside of the student health team. This became visible in the translation of *pedagogic group-oriented collegial learning*.

The design of special educational support within adult education remains to be considered. This study shows that expanding student health teams creates both risks and opportunities. There is a risk that group-oriented pedagogical initiatives will be subordinated to investments in special educational needs units. Solutions that offer greater flexibility and individualisation within the classroom might be worthwhile to investigate, instead of creating a separate special education path in smaller groups. The idea of adult education as emancipatory (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015) is based on the notion that adult education provides a second chance because of students' previous school failures (Gerber, 2012). However, if individualisation means categorising students as being in poor health, it could jeopardise the emancipatory role, as Papaduopolos (2023) describes, especially if there are insufficient resources to meet identified needs.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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