
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) from student's subjective perspectives

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In 2007 the Danish Government (Ministry of Education, 2007) drew up a strategy on how to implement the European policy of lifelong learning (European Commission, 2001). This led to the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which covers non-formal, informal and formal learning (Aagaard, K. 2014, Alheit, P. 2012). It also led to new legal admission requirements to higher education, so that students with no formal upper secondary qualification can be admitted to higher education on the basis of RPL, as assessed by the individual institution. In international literature these students are also called "non-traditional students".

The aim of this paper is to contribute to an understanding of the experiences of recognition of prior learning as seen from students' subjective perspectives in Denmark. It is based on my current PhD thesis. The concept of lifelong learning has various meanings (Jarvis, P, 2012) and it can be viewed from a political, social and subjective perspective.

The objective is to understand RPL students' timing of commencement of education, choice of education, identity process and coping with being a RPL student in relation to their social and cultural background and their life history experience. The focus in this paper is subjective experiences of the RPL process as well as experiences of being a RPL student.

My research focuses on students taking the Bachelor programmes in Architectural Technology & Construction Management (ATCM) and Physiotherapy, both of which are 3½-year programmes. These were chosen on the assumption that the students' professional knowledge and history would influence the educational culture and also for reasons of funding.

RPL students are typically older students from their late 20s to mid-40s, without upper secondary school qualifications, and many are married with children. In the ATCM programme, 1.5% of the students are RPL students, whereas 3% of the students in the Physiotherapy programme are RPL students.

This research project is a part of a larger project on subjectivity and learning of RPL students at the Graduate School of Lifelong Learning at Roskilde University (2013-2017), which includes two further PhD projects focusing on other bachelor programmes. Lindholm J. is focusing on health care education (physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and nursing), and Mellon K. is focusing on the teacher training and pedagogy programmes.

1. Methods

Life history interviews

Data were collected through life history interviews with seven students admitted via RPL to one of the two bachelor programmes.

Biographical methods accept the use of life history interviews as empirical material and recognize the narrative (Salling Olesen, 2002). I used the life history interview to understand how RPL students' background and experiences influenced their everyday life as students. This enables an understanding of different cultural, social and individual lives from the "inside" in an endeavour to understand lived life and resulting actions.

Psycho-societal approach (PSA)

PSA in Denmark has its roots in the Roskilde Life History Project, a theoretical and methodological project funded by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities. The aim of the project was clarification of the relationship between learning, education, participation and life history (Andersen, A.S. et al., 1998).

The project was inspired by the critical theory concept of subjectivity from the Frankfurt School. Critical theory understands human subjectivity as a result of socialization, in which a specific version of cultural and social experience is embodied, becoming a complex of conscious and unconscious preconditions for subjective action and later experience (Salling Olesen, 2002). Lorenzer is an influential contributor with his theory on socialization and language acquisition which provides a theoretical basis for this type of interpretation (Salling Olesen, 2015), as well as with his method of deep hermeneutics (Leithäuser, 2012, Salling Olesen, 2012, Salling Olesen & Weber, 2012), which enables us to go beyond the immediate understanding of social interaction (Salling Olesen, 2015). Lorenzer developed this method for cultural analysis (Leithäuser, 2012, Salling Olesen, 2012, Salling Olesen & Weber, 2012), and this further inspired Leithäuser and Volmerg to use it in research on working life and everyday life.

In practice, I have transcribed the interviews and repeatedly listened through the material to find interesting citations that illuminated the focus of the project. In the interpretation of the transcribed interviews, I looked for unusual use of language, notable ways of relating to the subject, expressions of feelings, relations

to others, descriptions of oneself and gaps and inconsistencies that could reveal experiences of relations, as a key to understanding learning and identity processes.

2. Theory

Learning is conceptualized as moments in individual life courses and subjective life experience (Weber, 2012, Salling Olesen 2002, Jarvis, 2012). I have been inspired by Salling Olesen's understanding of learning as an ongoing attribution of meaning to one's experiences which takes place in an interaction with others and is therefore also seen as social learning. Therefore, the possibility as well as the ability to connect one's experiences with the "new knowledge or skill(s)" becomes essential. Learning is embedded in everyday life and students' experiences as part of their subjective life history and therefore knowledge will be interpreted differently by each student (Salling Olesen, 2007). This means that the meaning making of what is taught will vary greatly, depending on factors such as context, previous experiences and the sense of well-being. This may allow for a new realization that can create personal development and change of identity.

3. Kenn

I will now present part of a life history interview as an example of the complexity of the subjective learner as a reality in the learner's narrative. This provides a special understanding of universal lived life, with the conflicts and contradictions it contains and its reflection of society. I will first give a brief introduction to the anonymized participant. After this I will present some analytical points.

It is important to note that the full analysis behind the findings is not included, but only exemplified by selected key excerpts from the interviews. Also, in some cases, the point in question may be blurred by translation. In all my citations, I have striven to translate with loyalty to both form and content.

My first subject is Kenn. He is 23 years old at the time of the interview and is in the last semester of the ATCM programme. We meet up at the entrance to his college and walk together to a meeting room, where the interview takes place. Kenn sits opposite me. He is busy writing his final bachelor project and therefore occupied with scientific methods. He tells me he recently conducted his first interview which he found challenging, which seems to lead to an understanding between Kenn and me.

When the interview starts, I offer him a sheet of paper with a lifeline printed on it, which can be a help to write down points as we go, but he does not use it. Instead he starts telling me in a rambling way that he finished school after the 9th grade. He didn't like school and he didn't seem to connect with his teachers at all. He resisted being a learner, as he thought it was pointless. The narrative tells a story

of a rebellious pupil with a feeling of lack of recognition of him as a person. While at school, he worked as a store manager. Without wishing to discredit his story, this puzzles me but is an essential part of his narrative. He was advised to go to upper secondary school by his teachers but he refused.

Kenn's plans for his life were to work, earn money and have a good time. Unfortunately, the business went bankrupt and instead Kenn started working as an electrician's assistant, where he worked on installing electricity in new houses. He did that for 1½ years, after which he returned to a store in the hope of becoming head of department. Kenn lives with his girlfriend who is also a student. Kenn is the middle child of three; his mother works in an office and his father is a butcher and a carpenter.

I find Kenn sliding away from my questions as an unconscious defence. The transcription reveals very clearly that the interview is full of shifts of perspectives, which gives this interview a special kind of distance that Kenn is creating to his own life history.

Kenn presents himself as a rebellious young man who has difficulty handling requirements, and therefore does not like authority. He is distancing himself in a special way from the programme as he sees it as a springboard to becoming an architect. Perhaps therefore he lacks peace of mind in his education. He is on his way to something else, which is reflected in the interview. Therefore, it becomes a big work of reconstruction for both Kenn and me: what is he doing here?

A year before starting the ATCM programme, Kenn contacted the student counsellor for the programme, while he was working at the store for the second time.

"We wrote to him that I would like to start and I wrote that I've been doing so and so and worked here and there, so that I in a sense could prove, not prove, show him that I'd been working since school, that I'd always been employed, I've never been out of work...ahh, I think in a way he could see the motivation, this one, he wants something and so on."

This is told as a matter of fact. The girlfriend is clearly getting him going in the process, as he says, *We wrote to him*. She is of great importance for Kenn's personal development. Then he changes the perspective and speaks of himself. It does not seem clear to Kenn which non-formal, informal and formal competences he holds and the reason for admission. This might also be the reason why it is difficult for Kenn to connect with the programme, as he is not conscious of the future use of the knowledge and skills that the programme provides. Then he changes perspectives again and tries to comprehend the counsellor's reasons for admission, which in Kenn's point of view are based on the fact that he was never out of work.

“Then he wrote back to me that I needed this and that subject (at upper secondary level), and then we could look at it again. Actually, he didn’t promise anything at that time. He said if you have those subjects, then it’s possible and then I took the subjects and a year later I applied.”

Kenn is still talking as a matter of fact about his first meeting with the programme and with the same distance which the whole interview gives an impression of. His inquiry is met with a barrier of three subjects at upper secondary level. He accepts this and the condition that this is no guarantee for his admission. He keeps working and he studies the three subjects in evening classes. So, in spite of his resistance to upper secondary school, he succeeded.

With the life story Kenn is telling me, I am puzzled that he is admitted through RPL and not an exemption.

“Well, one just, somewhere, it’s just a matter of priority because it was just at that moment that I needed to spend time on that, then you have to put your friends and girlfriend aside and now you’re working and going to evening school, it’s just one year of one’s life, yes it was hard work of course... but I got through it”.

The first part of the quotation is said normally while the end *but I got through it* is said triumphantly. Kenn seems to be ready to shake off his resistance to education. He shows that he is changing his plan of life. Kenn explains how he intends to use the ACTM programme as a quicker way into the architect programme.

“I’m deeply grateful for the way that one can do it, that you could – get around it, so that I didn’t have to spend two or three years in upper secondary, this is a quicker way for that - I’m deeply grateful.”

It is with a clear voice and a short pause before *I’m deeply grateful* that Kenn understands his admission through RPL as a gift. The quotation shows how he shifts perspective from I to one and you and back to I. He argues that three and a half years in the ACMT programme is a quicker way into the architect programme, which is not the case, as upper secondary school in Denmark is maximum three years. In Kenn’s view it is quicker, I suppose, in that Kenn would not be able to do upper secondary school without acknowledging that his school teachers were right. Therefore, RPL becomes the possibility between his life dream of architecture and education.

We are now talking about how he finds being an RPL student and he tells me:

“Yes yes yeah, how can one say it, of course one could from the beginning have chosen to say that RPL is so and so but I didn’t choose... I’ve chosen just to say that I was an electrician, it was easier, now I have a fair amount of

experience with that, so yes, that's what we're going to do. It was like I fitted in and to protect myself, if one can say it like that...yes."

He is speaking with a low voice and in a very mumbling way, when we are talking about being an RPL student. His denial of being an RPL student is inconsistent with being grateful for admission as an RPL student. It shows that being an RPL student is full of ambivalence; he does not wish to be different, which could indicate that he is in the process of changing his identity from the rebellious student to a traditional student in the ACTM programme, which is why he lies to his fellow students. In a societal perspective, the socialization process is strong and people normally only wish to diverge from it for something positive. Kenn does not recognize RPL as equivalent to upper secondary school or the education of a craftsman; he gives it a lower status, which indicates that in Danish society RPL is not recognized.

4. Discussion

In Denmark, admission through RPL takes place by compiling a competence folder, where one has to document one's competencies and describe one's motivation for the programme. Counsellors have to assess the applicant on two parameters: Are the competencies equivalent to upper secondary level and is the applicant able to complete the programme (Styrelsen for videregående uddannelser, 2015). In Denmark, no one has taken the responsibility to actively provide information about this form of admission to higher education. In the national guidelines for education (UG), one can read about the folder but not about its purpose in connection to higher education and on the university college websites this form of admission is not on any of the main pages. This reflects the lack of discussion of RPL in Danish society and I would argue is the reason why RPL is not fully recognized.

Admission practice to the two programmes seems different. In the ACTM programme, all applicants are met with a requirement of 1 to 3 upper secondary level subjects. This is probably due to the experience that this helps the students. But it also allows for interpretation as a way for the profession to close in on itself. This is a familiar practice, which I interpreted as unwillingness by the educational system to recognize non-formal or informal learning. On the other hand, RPL students in the Physiotherapy programme either have a higher educational level or a qualifying examination. These different practices might be because of the different way of structuring the programmes by the government. The ACTM programme may admit as many students as they like (open admission, whereas Physiotherapy has a set number of admissions (closed admission). In the Danish education system, programmes receive funding according to how many students succeed in the programme. Therefore, the ACTM might have greater willingness for risk than the Physiotherapy programme as one lost student equals less money

lost for the running of the programme. Another structural challenge is assessing whether a student will be able to succeed in the programme, which might be used as an excuse for not admitting any RPL students into a programme. A third practice that is seen in both programmes is that RPL is used to admit students categorized as exemptions.

For RPL students, RPL becomes a second chance in life to get on the train of education or to shift direction to something that seems more meaningful in their lives than their educational choice, or lack of choice, from the time when they were 16-20 years old. Their life history witnesses life changes, where the possibilities for or the necessity of getting an education become essential.

Kondrup emphasizes that those adults who choose education are marginalized in the labour market (Kondrup, 2012) and Illeris highlights how they are economically and socially marginalized (Illeris, 2003). These assumptions are partly identical to my informants' stories that reveal very different reasons for this change, such as a shift of direction due to stress, securing one's future, a new identity because of work injuries, a way to early disability retirement, part of a deal for achieving freedom, moving on to something else and proving to oneself that taking higher education is possible.

Six out of seven informants did not know about RPL when they asked the counsellors informally about the possibility of admission. Only one of my informants knew about RPL before he applied and that was because he had already been a positively assessed RPL student in another programme.

All informants found the actual RPL process to be positive, but it is worth noting that they all had a successful application. They used terms like deep gratitude, being lucky, getting through the eye of the needle and relief that they did not have to do the whole of upper secondary school. RPL became an entrance to the educational system in a process that encouraged empowerment. When they started the programmes, these feelings seemed to fade into the background. They were faced with a new reality, and were not proud of being admitted on the basis of RPL. From the point of view of the programme, they were just like any other students (comment from teachers of both programmes).

Kenn lied about the fact that he is an RPL student. Others said that they did not talk about it unless they were asked directly, which indicates that being an RPL student in these two programmes is nothing to be proud of and that there is no real recognition of prior learning. Thus, being an RPL student is full of ambivalences.

Finally, all RPL students participate in the programmes, in spite of their different competences upon entering. This raises the question: which competences does one need to succeed in the two programmes? It is shown that a student with limited academic competence can make it through the programmes. My analysis does not give an unequivocal answer to that question, but rather emphasizes a

combination of general competences, such as daring to make new attributions of meaning and realizations, combined with a high incentive to take the programme. Recognition of prior learning to some degree questions the admission system to higher education.

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