

## Multicultural Education in Sweden

The growing debate on multicultural or intercultural education, as it is called in Sweden, is part of larger transformative processes that are changing the image of Sweden as a monocultural welfare state. Cultural awareness among national minorities, transnational migration patterns and the rise of the EU are among these processes. The 2010 Swedish general election revealed a changed political landscape. The Social Democratic Party, which has held power in all but nine years since 1932, achieved its lowest result in 100 years. A centre-right coalition succeeded, for the first time since the 1930s, to keep the political power for a second consecutive mandate period, and a far right party, the Sweden Democrats, won seats in the Swedish parliament. All these processes challenge the idea of *Folkhemmet* (the people's home), the core notion of "the Swedish model" of welfare state.

Introduced by the social democratic politician Per Albin Hansson in 1934, this notion has played a crucial role in the Swedish self-understanding and in the stability of the political system in Sweden. The Social Democratic Party and its politics of social equality has been the pivotal axis of the Swedish model. This policy stresses the redistributive role of the state underpinned by high levels of taxation and public spending. However, the primacy of class issue was questioned by the women's movement, whose demand for political representation has been a recurrent theme in Swedish politics since the 1960s. The growing cultural awareness among national minorities and the rising number of immigrants has led to a questioning of the notion of a culturally homogenous nation and brought about the demand for cultural recognition. This is the context of our discussion on intercultural education.

## *Education in Sweden*

Sweden introduced compulsory schooling in 1842. Since the 1960s there is a nine-year compulsory comprehensive school for students aged 7-16. Gymnasiet, or upper secondary education for ages 16-19, is non-compulsory. It is however free of charge and open to students who have completed comprehensive school. As part of the social democratic tradition of equality, there has been strong public support to adult liberal education after age 20 (Komvux), in order to offer a second chance to adults who have missed the first one in ordinary schools. Municipalities have an obligation to offer free Swedish language courses for newcomer adult immigrants (SFI). There are also special schools for those with learning disabilities. Furthermore, Sami schools offer the children of the Sami, a national ethnic minority group living in parts of northern Sweden, an education with a Sami focus.

As a result of two reforms in the early 1990s, the Swedish education system became decentralized from the national government to the municipalities. The first reform (1991) transferred the provision of compulsory, upper secondary and adult education to the municipalities. The second reform (1993) merged grants for education, childcare, elderly care and infrastructure into general grants.

Education in Sweden is goal oriented. The national government defines the national objectives and guidelines of education and curriculum. Municipalities receive a lump sum and decide how they want to accomplish national objectives, how school education is to be organized and what resources to allocate for this purpose. Each school devises its own work plan, based on the curriculum and local priorities. Within this framework, teachers are free to decide teaching methods and select teaching materials.

The National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) is the administrative

authority for the school system. It exercises supervision over school education services and childcare services, develops syllabi and criteria for grading, as well as reviews the quality and results of education.

Decentralization has encouraged support for independent or private schools. These schools are open to everyone and follow the same curricula, receiving grants from the municipalities according to the same criteria as the municipalities' own schools. They are however managed by private interests.

### *Migration and Cultural Diversity*

Since the Second World War, Sweden has successively become a host country. During the war, Sweden received refugees from neighboring countries. Due to the Swedish neutrality, the Swedish industries were not destroyed by war as they were in other European countries. The post-war demands for Swedish commodities stimulated an economic boost, which prompted a demand for foreign labor power, mostly recruited directly from Finland, Southern Europe and Yugoslavia. A stream of political refugees from the so-called third world and family reunification marked the decades between the early 1970s and 1990s. Since the early 1990s until present day, refugees from South-Eastern Europe and Iraq have dominated migration to Sweden.

Decades of migration have brought to Sweden ethnic and religious groups that differ from Swedish natives. In 2009 more than 18% of the Swedish population, 1,733,913 of 9,412,851 had foreign background (Statistics Sweden, SCB). Islam is now the second largest religion in Sweden (SCB). Furthermore, Sweden has ratified the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (2000), which entails

the official recognition of five national minorities: Samis, Tornedalians, Swedish Finns, Roma and Jews. Correspondingly, Sweden has five recognized minority languages: Sami, Meänkieli, Finish, Romani and Jiddisch. In 2009 18% of all Swedish pupils were either born or had parents born outside of Sweden (*Skolverket*).

These demagogical changes have changed the overall context of Swedish education and raised challenges regarding teacher competence, curriculum contents and educational aims. Issues related to diversity, human rights and citizenship have become crucial.

### *Intercultural Education*

Intercultural education is mentioned for the first time in a Swedish official report in 1983 (SOU 1983:57), where it is stated: “intercultural education involves all children and all adults in school – also the society outside of school” (SOU 1983:57, 43). Another official report (SOU 1998:99) considers intercultural education as the “natural foundation for all teaching” and recommends that an intercultural perspective should permeate teacher education (SOU 1998:99, 17-18). However, a multilayered gap separates this rhetoric from educational practice (Mulinari 2004, Lorentz 2007). This discrepancy can mainly be explained by multicultural education in Sweden, as in other European countries, being characterized by what we can term the Kantian paradigm. In his political and educational writings, Kant provides theoretical legitimacy for cultural and racial hierarchies. According to Kant, depending on persistent living under different climatic conditions, different “races” have developed different inborn talents, dispositions and inclinations, like rationality, laziness or cowardice (Kant 2000). Accordingly, they are predisposed to different tasks in the Kantian

predetermined scheme for human progression towards perfection. The Kantian kingdom of ends is a realm of moral freedom as opposed to nature, acting out of universal moral laws under the guidance of practical reason. In modern time, according to Kant, it is only the white race that has developed the talent of being rational, the capability of controlling its instincts and bodily needs by the faculty of reason, while other races are determined by particularities of culture, class, gender and instincts. Accordingly, it is the global spread of the Western culture that can lead humanity toward the kingdom of ends. Other races are to subdue themselves to this mission of the West (Knat 1991). This scheme of human development has led to the establishment of Eurocentrism and a scientific notion of “race” (Bernasconi 2000, Gray 2007, McCarthy 2009, Mack 2010). This Kantian heritage has become an integrated part of the tacit infrastructure of education. This means that it continues to operate by involving subtle ideas that have been built into the very notions of education and in the way education is performed in the everyday practice of schools. Thus, it operates beyond individual teachers’ conscious choices through education as institution. This means that the educational system operates along racist lines without recognition; racism persists despite official policies to eliminate it. Since these elements have become implicit in educational discourse, it is difficult to identify and to defy them. This common Western heritage has been in resonance with the Swedish idea of *Folkhemmet*, another pillar of tacit infrastructure of education in Sweden, which has established a Swedish identity based on ethnocentrism. The effect of these concepts is that Swedish educators and policymakers continue to work in old fashions in new multicultural contexts. Consequently, education in Sweden is arranged around a monocultural perspective, despite the country never being monocultural (Norberg 1998, 2000, Lahdenperä 1997). Empirical studies

show that despite the official rhetoric of cultural recognition, assimilation in the long run is the aim of education in Sweden. Some researchers even talk of a hidden agenda for assimilation (Norberg 2000: 514).

Influenced by the tacit infrastructure of education, intercultural education in Sweden is designed for “the others” as distinct from the mainstream education for “us”. The main concern is non-Western immigrants, especially Muslims as the paradigm of “otherness”, and how to normalize and assimilate these migrants into Swedish culture. Generally, the multiplicity and contingency of other cultures is understood against a background of Swedish-Christian culture as unified and universal; good culture is either Swedish or compatible with it. It is then an educational task to guide the others into the culture for their own good. Intercultural education is thus conceived as an interim stage during which particularities of other cultures are dissolved into the universal Western culture. Accordingly, Swedish teachers use their own cultural values as educational norm (Lahdenperä 1997).

In this educational paradigm, cultural belonging explains educational performance. If a child of non-Western background achieves poorly, it is due to her or his cultural belonging, but if a student of Western background in the same classroom performs poorly, it is because of factors other than culture (class, gender, parent education, health, etc.). If a child with non-Western background succeeds at school, it is due to her or his integration into the Western culture. Accordingly, children of foreign origin are conceived as problems (Mulinari 2004). Intercultural education is designed to address this “problem”. This culturalization of education not only obscures real problems, but is also a fragmentation of education. By fragmentation, I refer to the imposition of arbitrary divisions on education (the division of education into an education for them and an education for

us), without due attention to our need for an inclusive education, which prepares all citizens for full participation in society, regardless of their background. Fragmentation has also entangled education in arbitrary divides of universalism and particularism. While the former neglects differences and risks discrimination, the latter exaggerates them and leads to segregation. Such an education is unable to make justice to differences in difference, differences within different ethnical groups. Another trait of fragmentation is putting perspectives of ethnicity, class and gender against each other or subduing the one to the other. As a result, problems are made invisible and solutions are sought in the wrong places.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

The cluster of problems mentioned above is in need of radical shifts in pedagogical ideals. Sweden has taken a number of important steps toward counteracting racism and discrimination in education. Comprehensive mother tongue tuition is offered to children of foreign background, from day care centers to upper secondary education where students have the right to choose their own mother tongue as a language option. Recognized minorities have the right to education in their own language even if the number of children is below five. Furthermore, there is an antidiscrimination legislation in higher education. Although necessary, these efforts are limited in scope, since they are designed within the Kantian paradigm. Unable to transcend the hierarchy of Western/non-Western, they perpetuate the fragmentation of education.

Swedish education needs to question the residue of the grand narrative of Folkhemmet regarding human development in favor of a development based on human diversity where education and human rights

are to be brought together. Most importantly, in order to become intercultural it needs a paradigm shift from the hegemonic and exclusive Kantian paradigm to a democratic and inclusive educational paradigm. This will expose the Eurocentric tacit infrastructure of the current education and enable us to overcome fragmentation in order to reach an inclusive understanding of education. The educational focus would shift from solving the “problem” of cultural differences to defying unfair hierarchies based on these differences. Indeed, it is these hierarchies that are to be defied rather than cultural differences as such. Permeating the whole curriculum, an inclusive educational paradigm is based on a participatory mindset and takes seriously the experiences of different groups. Departing from intellectual equality between individuals with different backgrounds, it includes the perspective of marginalized groups in knowledge production and dissemination and thereby contributes to the growth of knowledge. Prospering the interplay between the self and the other, it contributes to objectivity of knowledge through covering a wide range of experiences and perspectives. As a result, educational and epistemic authority is placed in the common knowledge; knowledge based on cognitive efforts of the self and the other. Such knowledge is worthwhile in regard to oneself and to others. This is a criterion of inclusion.

Decentralization has caused considerable differences between municipalities regarding intercultural education. It is conditioned by the willingness of individual teachers and municipalities. Generally, intercultural education is reduced to a matter of migrant-dense schools. Located in big city suburbs, these schools are the results of the marginalizing effects of a discriminatory labor market and segregating housing policies. The poor performance of these schools is thus a complex issue, defying simplistic explanation based on culture. A solution to this



problem requires cooperative efforts of the national government, municipalities and schools at educational, economic, political and cultural levels. These efforts will establish nuanced correlations between culture, class and ethnicity. For this purpose, the national government needs more effective monitoring means.

Sweden has a strong tradition of democracy in school. Students are expected to take responsibility for their studies, work together in accordance with democratic principles and foster a critical approach toward educational forms and contents. Teachers are assumed to function as facilitators. Misunderstood by children of foreign background, school democracy sometimes leads to a lack of discipline in classrooms. Some researchers argue that the handing over of responsibility to students in multicultural classrooms is the root of the problem (Nordberg 2000, Lahdenperä 1998). In my opinion, the problem is rather school democracy being based on the single culture of the majority and on rules more familiar for children of native background (Norberg 2000). As a result, these children understand the rules of the game better than those of foreign background, especially when the rules are implicit and open for different interpretations.

School democracy can indeed function as a basis for intercultural education, provided it becomes inclusive and encompasses democratic values from all cultures in the classrooms. Each child then contributes to democracy in her or his own way. Teachers need intercultural competencies in order to be able to function as multicultural facilitators. Recruitment of teachers with different backgrounds brings the perspective of minority cultures into the classrooms. These inclusive working methods solve not only the problem of discipline in school, but also develop solutions to daily problems of racism and Eurocentrism as well as to poor

educational performance in a non-hegemonic manner. Schools would thus offer pupils a basis to develop their intercultural sensitivities and make themselves interculturally competent rather than imposing pre-designed assimilation plans on them. Such a pedagogy prospers dialogue and lets “the otherness of others” become manifest “through their own narratives” (Benhabib 2002: 14). The logic of inclusion then becomes the common ethos of education and permeates the every day life of schools.

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