

FACING THE PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGE OF TEACHING UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE CHILDREN IN THE SWEDISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

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Abstract

The social inclusion of refugee children is an important issue in Sweden and many other European countries. Sweden accepts more than 20% of all unaccompanied immigrant children in the EU. Logically, effective schooling is needed for these children to create the necessary pre-conditions for their successful integration into society. However, political interest and state funding concentrates instead on assuring good quality living conditions and legal support for incoming minors, leaving the responsibility for their education to underfunded municipal schools. Accordingly, a study conducted in a municipal secondary school and a university teacher education in Northern Sweden revealed low preparedness to meet the educational needs of immigrant children. Sociocultural and socio-political theoretical lenses were used in the study to understand the situation. Pedagogical action was taken on the teacher education programme in Umeå to improve the situation and issues concerning the integration of unaccompanied immigrant minors in the Swedish school system were explored in an interdisciplinary course at the end of the students' teacher training. In group interviews and guided discussions during the course, student teachers recognised existing systemic problems in the education of immigrant children and expressed a feeling of a lack of practical intercultural competence to meet such children.

Key words: *intercultural education, refugees, minors, teacher education.*

Introduction

The integration of refugee children in the school systems of European countries is an actively developing research field. Logically, as Bourgonje (2010) points out, the presence of significant numbers of pupils coming from abroad has complex implications for education systems. In 2008, the Commission of the European Communities presented a Green Paper on the challenges and opportunities for EU education systems dealing with children from migrant backgrounds. Currently, Sweden with a population of less than 2% of the European Union in total accepts over 20% of all immigrant minors in the EU (European Commission, 2012). However, studies concerning the integration of unaccompanied refugee minors in the Swedish educational systems are lacking, and in particular studies concerning the preparedness of teachers to assure the children's success in their studies.

During the past ten years the number of asylum seeking unaccompanied children in Sweden has increased ten times, from about 400 persons in the years 2004-2005 to about 4,000 persons in 2013. Most of them are boys (about 80%) aged 14 to 17, mainly from Afghanistan and Somalia, but with a recent increase in refugees from other countries, such as Syria and Eritrea. These children are placed in different municipalities around the country that take responsibility for their education and socialisation into the Swedish society. Currently there is a system of voluntary accommodation of refugee minors, however, municipalities are forced to take children, according to a centrally defined quota if this does not work.

In 2006, the Swedish state expected about 300 child refugees, however 816 arrived (Häggroth, 2011). About 6,000 unaccompanied children were expected to seek asylum in Sweden during 2014, but the real figure became over 7000. The development of the situation over the last ten years is presented in table 1 below (based on official statistics from the Swedish Migration Board <http://www.migrationsverket.se/info/790.html>).

Table 1. Trend of increase in asylum seeking unaccompanied minors over ten years.

Year	Number of unaccompanied children
2004	388
2005	398
2006	816
2007	1,264
2008	1,510
2009	2,250
2010	2,393
2011	2,657
2012	3,578
2013	3,852
2014	7,049

According to Häggroth (2011), the Swedish state has been unprepared to deal with such a massive influx of unaccompanied refugee minors. This has led to a long waiting time for residence permits for the children. During this period children remained, in Bhabha's (2009) words, stateless illegals with very limited rights. However, according to the Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU, 2011), in recent years the situation has begun to improve. Nowadays, most of the asylum seeking unaccompanied immigrant minors get a residence permit rather quickly, within four to five months <http://www.migrationsverket.se/ensamkommandebarn>.

Specific education designed to facilitate refugee minors' access and integration into the national schooling system should be provided by all EU Member States (FRA, 2010). The research team behind the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) 2010 report identified four factors that have to be considered when organising the education of refugee minors.

First, the need to develop the necessary language skills as quickly as possible to enable integration into mainstream school; this is important both in terms of educational achievement and for developing relations with other children. Secondly, the need to place children in schools as soon as possible, on the basis of an individual assessment of their educational needs: children's ability to follow the courses needs to be carefully assessed, to avoid placing them at a level that is either too low or too high for them; this needs to be reassessed periodically, as children may be making fast progress, which needs to be reflected in their placement. Thirdly, some of these children may be illiterate and require special tuition to address this. Fourthly, there is a need for educational and psycho-social counselling and support: many of these children may be traumatised as a result of their journey or exploitation from adults, they come from countries with a very different educational system, different teaching cultures and different relations between teachers and students and thus find it difficult to adjust; in addition they need help with homework that for other children is provided by parents or siblings. (FRA, 2010, p. 36)

In Sweden, the younger refugees take preparatory language classes, while attending an ordinary class in the compulsory school. The elder children attend secondary school, where language tuition is provided through either the 'Swedish for Immigrants' (<http://www.sweden>).

gov.se/sb/d/6997/a/67940) or the 'Individual Introductory Courses for Immigrants' schemes. Teachers of Swedish as a second language are the main intercultural mediators in the process of introducing immigrant children to a new language as well as to Swedish values, traditions and culture. They get some help from mother tongue tutors, e.g. native speakers of their own language, who have lived in Sweden for a long time and know Swedish rather well. These tutors usually work in a school some hours per week.

Intercultural education has long been constitutive component of Swedish teacher training (Johansson, 2008). However, this topic has previously been treated mainly theoretically as many of the teacher students, particularly in the Northern part of Sweden, still have few instances of personal encounters with immigrants. They come from rather culturally homogeneous communities and the teacher profession still remains a field where few immigrants are occupied. Currently, the theory needs to be applied in practice when teacher trainees go to schools and face culturally diverse classrooms. This becomes a serious challenge for many of them. Student teachers need to know how to deal with heterogeneity when teaching and be able to identify intercultural subject matter appropriate to their teaching level and the school subject. A recent study by Johansson (2012) discusses this in relation to teaching history in Swedish schools. The teaching of Swedish as a second language and other foreign languages are didactical areas where intercultural competence appears as a core concept in the school curriculum and teacher education. However, in the curriculum discourse of other subjects this concept appears to be poorly implemented.

The study presented addresses the following research questions: How do unaccompanied refugee children experience their meeting with the Swedish school system? What factors contribute to their new identity construction in Sweden? How do student teachers conceptualise their roles as facilitators of the educational success of immigrant children?

Theoretical Considerations

Sociocultural theory is used as a generic theoretical perspective in this study. Newly incoming unaccompanied refugee children have to become functionally literate citizens in the Swedish society as quickly as possible. Therefore, their first major educational task is to learn a new, and for them foreign language, Swedish, the most important tool for socialisation. Säljö (2009) explains that:

The major interest of a sociocultural perspective is the study of how human skills—be they bodily, cognitive, perceptual or a mix of these dimensions—are appropriated by individuals. The ability to perform various activities is seen as resulting from an increasing ability to structure the world by means of language. What the child can do with the support and under control of a more competent peer, he or she can eventually do independently and without such external support. Thus, language learning is not the acquisition of vocabulary, syntax, and other features, it also represents a growing capacity to structure one's own behaviours and intellectual practices in purposeful manners in situated practices.

Furthermore, Jin and Cortazzi (2002) state that learning a foreign language implies a degree of intercultural learning. Accordingly, the consideration of different dimensions of teachers' intercultural competence is important for the study. This includes an understanding of one's own cultural norms and expectations that mediate teaching and learning in the classroom and knowledge about the immigrant children's cultural background. Language and culture are intimately interconnected. Individual identities, values and norms are created and internalised through communication and shaped by the local socio-cultural and political context. Learning always occurs in the context of different human practices and schooling is just one of them. In this way, sociocultural theory justifies the importance of meaningful peer collaboration and communication (in- and outside the school) for learning and social growth which is particularly important to consider when organising the education of immigrant minors.

Additionally, theoretical aspects of the socio-political framing of education (Gutiérrez, 2013), in particular issues of identity construction, are considered in the study. Identities are constructed in spaces and events; they are not fixed. From a socio-political perspective the concept of identity is related to what a person does, his or her activities, rather than to the innate quality of personality. Furthermore:

An individual's identity is partly in his or her control and partly in the hands of others who seek to define/create/act themselves. As an individual, I can project a particular image of myself by the things I say (to myself and others) and the ways I interact, but others also participate in my identity by interpreting (through their own lenses) the meanings of my words and actions (Gutiérrez, 2013, 45).

Therefore, identity is dynamic and depends on participation in a particular community. An individual can reveal different identities through participation in different practices that position an individual "through and in race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, language, and so forth" (Gutiérrez, 2013, 46).

These theoretical assumptions are important for reflecting on how different contexts and communities of practice can influence the complex process of new identity construction for newly arrived unaccompanied refugee minors in the Swedish school system. Gaining additional insights in this process has great value for shaping intercultural educational practice.

Methodology of Research

The study was organised in two stages. In the preparatory stage, the schooling situation of a group of asylum seeking unaccompanied children recently placed in a remote area school in the Northern part of Sweden was studied by Carlsson (2011) under supervision of the first author. In order to allow for an in-depth exploration of immigrant children's school situation and views about their integration in a new context, this stage was built on a case study methodology. A case study can be defined as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Marriam, 2009, 40). The research was conducted with a group of six 16/17 year-old newly arrived children. Half of them came from Somalia and half from Afghanistan. They had varying educational backgrounds, from the functionally illiterate to almost finishing private secondary schools in their home country. Individual interviews were the central method of data collection (Carlsson, 2011).

The second and main stage of the study consisted of the reflective analysis of the design and implementation of a week-long teaching module on "gender and ethnicity". This module was designed as a part of the compulsory course "Teacher's Professional and Scientific Competence" that student subject teachers take in the final phase of their education. This part of the course consisted of: an introductory lecture; a lecture on "the construction of gender and ethnicity"; workshops focusing on discussion of cases (including the case described by Carlsson, 2011) and construction of an own pedagogical case with a focus on newly arrived unaccompanied immigrant minors; individual readings; and a literature seminar where the students' own cases were discussed in a guided group form.

The data collection was carried out through noticing technique (Mason, 2002), i.e. the happenings and expressions that attracted the course teachers' (the authors) attention were briefly noted during the course activities for further systematic reflections afterwards. During regular meetings the authors examined the account of noted events seeking their significance for the study and threading themes for further analysis. The group work allowed the authors, who were the course teachers, to explore students' theoretical understanding of the cases and their practical suggestions for improving the educational situation of asylum seeking children. The course evaluations also contributed to the data collection.

In total, about three hundred student teachers from different specialisations took the course during four years when the both authors work with it. The course was conducted twice

per year in spring and autumn term. The introductory lecture presented a method of working with pedagogical cases and included a talk by a practitioner, an experienced teacher, working with immigrant children. The target group of the course was rather heterogeneous. It included student teachers for grades 7-12 and grades 10-12 in different subjects (sport, philosophy, physics, mathematics, chemistry, etc.). Most of them have never studied intercultural topics and never met asylum seeking children. Therefore, work with cases concerning newly arrived unaccompanied immigrant minors in the Swedish schools gave the student teachers an opportunity to reflect on their readiness to meet this issue in practice. It was short but for many students it was the only teaching module raising their awareness concerning the pedagogical challenges of working with immigrant minors.

Results of Research

The results are presented following the overall design of the study: first, the findings from the case study conducted in a school are briefly discussed and after that findings from the teacher education course are presented.

The School Case

The data collected in the case study provides evidence that the existing practice of introducing unaccompanied immigrant children into the Swedish school system is encumbered with multiple barriers that impede their success of integration into Swedish society. The teachers receiving immigrant minors into their classes did not receive any preparation for this. In the particular case described, they did not even receive any “pedagogical mappings” of the children before they showed up in the classroom.

The children interviewed expressed their feeling of being in a social vacuum, with very limited possibilities for interaction with Swedish people. This was perceived as one of the main factors impeding them learning the Swedish language quickly. They wanted to focus on learning Swedish and thought of other school subjects (e.g. mathematics or handicraft) as less important.

Mother tongue tutors helped the pupils to understand school culture and subject knowledge, but their time was very limited and considered absolutely insufficient by the pupils. Interestingly enough, the pupils who had longer schooling from their home countries experienced more difficulties/conflicts with the Swedish educational system than their rather analphabetic peers.

Several pedagogical tensions were identified concerning their understanding of the teacher’s role and work methods. As one pupil commented “in my country the teacher helped me to understand, here I have to learn to understand by myself”. The study showed that children did not have well developed skills of peer collaboration and cooperative work in the classroom. They were not used to asking for peer help and offering help when doing study tasks. Particularly at the beginning, the teacher had to actively encourage even simple translation of questions to get a sharing understanding within the group (Carlsson, 2011). Formative assessment procedures, such as writing a logbook of study progress, were also met with suspicion and resistance by the students. They associated this with a “girls writing diary” occupation. They wanted clear marks from the teacher to see their progress, not self-reflection exercises and tacit coaching from the teachers.

Different contextual factors were reported by the children in the case study as negatively affecting their socialisation, for example, geographical remoteness. They wanted to live in a bigger city, where they will have “something to do after school”.

The Course Study

The results from the course study show that student teachers when discussing the case recognise existing systemic problems in the education of unaccompanied immigrant children and feel a lack of practical intercultural competence to deal with such problems. Student teachers in the Northern part of Sweden still have few opportunities for personal encounters with immigrants (in their schooling and teacher education). A typical narrative was: “we had a class of immigrant children (IVIK) in our school, but they were placed in a separate corridor, they also had lunch at a separate table together with their teacher, we actually never communicated with them”.

The teaching profession still remains a field where very few immigrants are employed. Student teachers admitted insufficient (if any) knowledge about Somali and Afghan culture, where many of the immigrant children in Sweden come from. As a student explained “we have very little information about the culture and nature of conflicts in these regions. When we discussed ethnic conflicts in previous courses examples were given from Chechnya and the Caucasus region, but we do not have many immigrants in Sweden from this area”. But those who did have experience of meeting Somali people through informal encounters admitted the need to know cultural basics (such as food, toilet, bed, gestures, etc.) for smooth relations. They also regarded tight bonds within extended immigrant families and patriarchal authoritarian family relationships as noticeably different from the Swedish tradition.

The student groups had a rather unanimous stereotypical picture of the cultures of learning that immigrant children were used to; such cultures were perceived as based on rote learning and memorisation conducted under supervision of an autocratic male teacher. They acknowledged an existing gap between the learning culture of the immigrant children and that of the Swedish dialogical and egalitarian classroom culture that needs to be actively bridged. In and out of school sport activities were seen as powerful integration instruments, however, with many explicit and implicit gender barriers.

The students were reluctant to recognise the enormous social and cultural variation within the group of unaccompanied child refugees as these variations were not easy to deal with pedagogically. They tended to discuss a child refugee group as rather homogeneous. However, based on the analysis of the case presented by Carlsson (2011), they recognise the importance of having good pedagogical mapping of each child coming to the class. They discussed the importance of knowing a child’s personal background in order to meet his or her individual educational needs in the best way. Ethical issues concerning dealing with such information were actively debated.

The students recognised that conflict might exist between the refugee children’s ambition to quickly learn the language and search for a job in Sweden, and the rather rigid systemic framework for entering the Swedish labour market. Primary education (9 years) is compulsory and for an average immigrant child it will take at least ten years in total to get the basic vocational training necessary for official employment. This time perspective can be rather discouraging to recognise for the young refugees as relatives in their home countries are frequently waiting for their economic support. However, the tradition of “taking the day as it comes” and not planning far ahead (which, according to the students’ experience is dominant in non-Western cultures) might facilitate acceptance of long study periods.

The dialogue was seen as the main tool to overcome social and pedagogical tensions in the classrooms that originated from ethnic grounds. Many students could recall meeting youngsters in schools during their school practice with very negative attitudes towards immigrants. However, students felt more theoretically than practically prepared to confront racist and ethnic prejudices in the classroom.

During the group discussions many students expressed empathy towards refugees. They felt pity for them. “We are so well off here, but they have so many problems there”. Emotional deliberations often tended to take over reasoning about pedagogical issues. The students wanted

to be kind and democratic in the classroom. They wanted negotiation and to give the children voice. They did not want to be autocratic. This attitude was partly in conflict with what the practitioners said during their presentations: that there is a need to show clear leadership and exercise teacher authority when working with immigrant minors. Experienced teachers pointed out the importance that any dialogue should be under teacher control otherwise the youngsters tend to take over the decision making process and steer activities to other issues than learning content.

Practitioners also expressed the pitfalls of compassion, when immigrant children wanted to be excused for everything (late arrival to classes, not studying hard, absence from school, etc.) because they feel that the teacher has great sympathy for their previous traumatic life experience. Minors can try to build a school “identity of excuse” when almost any behaviour can be accepted and excused. Such practical advice appeared to be useful for the students. They not only drew attention to the different identities that immigrant children might consciously or unconsciously construct, their group and individual variations, but also encouraged students to see the important role of strong leadership in the classroom.

Discussion

Sociocultural theory underlines the importance of supportive context and interpersonal communication for effective learning and socialisation (Säljö, 2009). The school study showed that all the basic material needs of immigrant children were well satisfied. Housing and school facilities were technically well functioning, but not socially appealing for the refugee children (Carlsson, 2011). They often felt socially isolated when being among Swedish people. Thus, they had a tendency to build an identity of alienation from the majority culture. Student teachers reflected that this process of building an invisible barrier of alienation has a tendency to be supported from both sides.

Student teachers’ narratives during the course revealed that they were rather confident to provide theoretical reasoning about teacher professional roles including intercultural perspectives. However, they recognised that their earlier teacher education courses and school practice did not give them adequate practical tools of intercultural mediation. Reflecting on opportunities of acquiring practical intercultural skills, the students suggested the possibility to be a part of a voluntary coaching network for supporting immigrant children’s out-of-school activities. A similar initiative of web-based Swedish language coaching for immigrant minors by student language teachers has been implemented in Stockholm municipality (<http://www.stockholm.se/svenskcoach>). This seems to be a promising initiative, but with the risk that personal contacts are taking place only in virtual reality, thus reinforcing perceptions of alienation.

Sport was seen by many students as a natural way for immigrant youth socialization in the local Swedish community. Student sports teachers could report many interesting initiatives involving immigrant children in sports lessons and sports club activities. However, they admitted that it can be more easily accessible for boys than for girls. Gender division in sport and many out of school activities was perceived by the students as an issue that will need careful consideration. In general, as Bourgonje (2010) shows, achieving gender equitable outcomes in education of migrant children is of concern in many countries.

Reflecting on the influence of the larger political and social context of refugee children’s education, the students recognised that a care-taking perspective dominates over an educational perspective. They wished for a shift in political, public and media attention from a ‘housing’ toward a ‘schooling’ situation for immigrant children. They felt that schools and individual teachers need much support in developing an inclusive educational environment and effective pedagogical tools for intercultural education in different subjects and school levels. At European level, this issue is actively promoted and monitored by European Policy Network on the education of children and young people with a migrant background, SIRUS (see www.sirius-migrationeducation.org).

Finally, some comments need to be made on the role of teacher education in helping future teachers to face the pedagogical challenge of working with unaccompanied refugee minors. Usually, newly examined teachers get a school position that includes a variety of tasks. When starting a professional career most of them will directly meet immigrant children; a challenging task for which they are poorly prepared. Experience shows that ambitions to help refugee minors with their learning and social problems can be overwhelming for young teachers. It is not easy to keep a distance when a teacher experiences becoming the only person of confidence for a child. How can they find a balance between taking other individuals' problems personally, exercising strong leadership in the classroom and teaching subject content using modern pedagogical methods? How to help refugee children to construct a new identity in Sweden that reduces the alienation barrier? These and many other issues need to be considered in teacher education and become part of the program of knowledge for any subject teacher. General pedagogical problems become accentuated when they concern the school situation of refugee minors.

Conclusions

Refugee children come from cultures that are quite distant from the Swedish culture. There are cultural gaps in expectations and beliefs, ideas about teaching and learning, and about appropriate ways of participating in classroom activities. Finding appropriate ways of exposing immigrants to Swedish cultures of communication and learning appears more challenging than accommodating their food traditions. The teacher students expressed concern that the education of unaccompanied immigrant children deserves more political and professional attention. More public initiatives and support groups focusing on education and integration of migrant children are also desirable.

Improvement of migrant education should be recognised as the burning issue faced by the Swedish educational system in general and teacher education in particular. The study identified a need to make more clear focus in teacher education programs on issues of diversity. Teachers of all subjects require intercultural knowledge and pedagogical training for meeting refugee children. Therefore, further research concerning the preparedness of teachers to assure the refugee minors' success in different subjects and their integration in the Swedish educational systems is needed.

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