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The multilingual school - how to establish spaces for negotiation

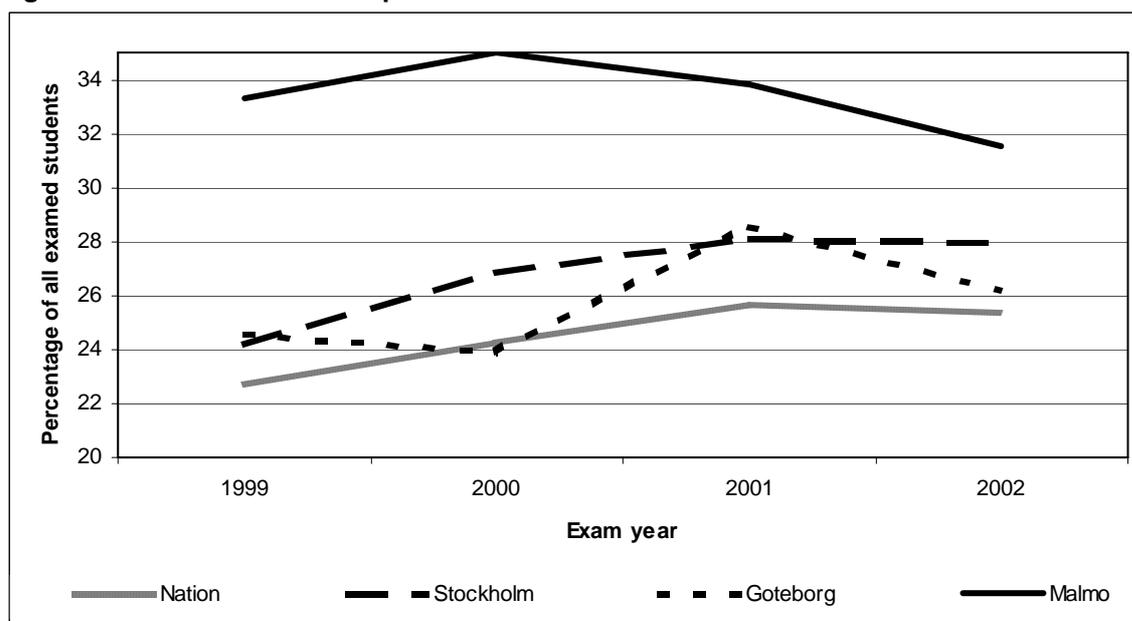
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Background

At the turn of the second millennium the media in Sweden were more than ever concerned with the increased number of compulsory school students not achieving basic educational goals. The situation seemed to be rapidly worsening, and according to the media children in large cities and suburban areas were facing the most severe problems. Due to this 'new' awareness among news agencies, compulsory education was discussed and debated in arenas ranging from schoolyards to political lobbies, but discussions in the political world and at the National Board of Education had been going on for some time.

Figure 1 (National Board of Education (NBE), 2003) shows the percentage of students during their ninth and last years who were *not* meeting the educational goals and gives a basic understanding of the overall situation. The different tracks represent the results at the national level and in the three largest Swedish cities.

Figure 1 Students with uncompleted education



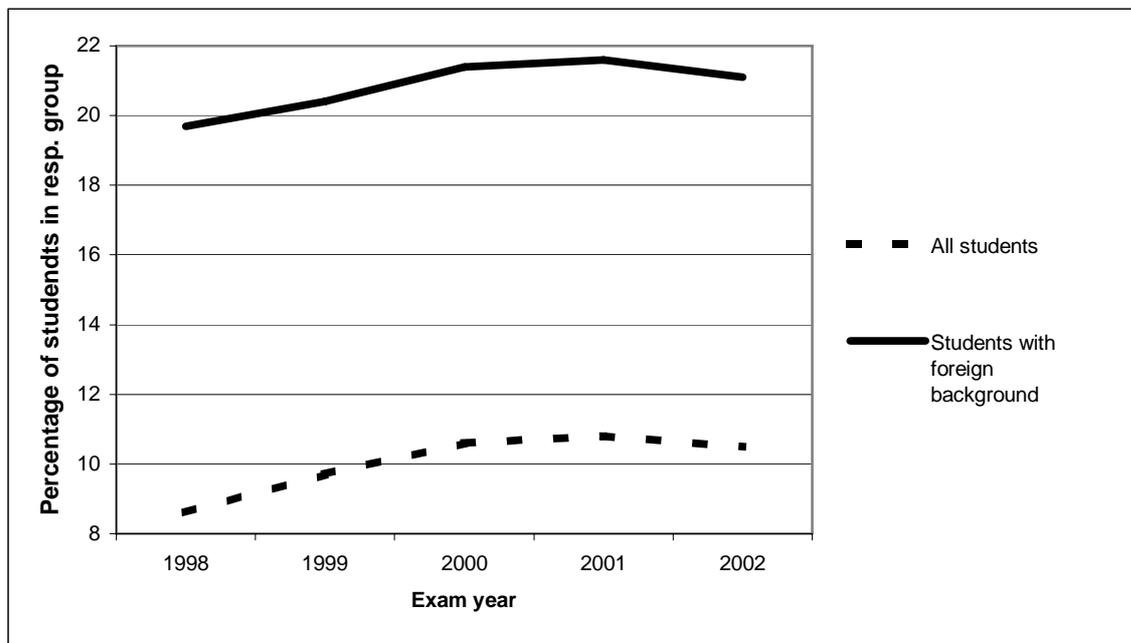
The overall picture may show an upturn in 2002, but the results remains far from desirable. Most striking is the difference between the larger urban areas, specifically Malmö, and the national figure, e.g. in 2000, 35 per cent of Malmö students did not reach the set goals, which means that only two out of every three students completed their education. Results such as these have led to studies to discover more about the roots of the problem. In the early 1990s the National Board of Education invited a wide range of studies to gain more knowledge in the field (Tallberg *et al.*, 2003). The first reports showed pupils with a foreign background were over-represented.¹ The presumed

¹ Foreign background as defined by the national Board of Education. Foreign background then refers to a person that is born outside of Sweden or a person who is born in Sweden with both parents born outside of Sweden. NBE, *Utan fullständiga betyg* (Stockholm, Skolverket, 2001).

correlation between the failure to achieve targets and students' (foreign) backgrounds led to an 'ethnification' of the situation and proposed solutions (Integrationsverket, 2001 and 2002).

Figure 2 (NBE, 2003) shows the percentage of students not reaching set goals in the three main subjects necessary to move up to the next level. The disproportionate representation amongst students with non-Swedish foreign backgrounds is obvious.

Figure 2 Students at national level not qualifying for *gymnasie* (High School)



It is interesting that the 11 per cent difference between the two groups does not change over time. A zero percentage of students not gaining access to higher education might seem Utopian, but this should not hinder us from striving to eliminate differences related to ethnicity, class or gender².

Research describing similar situations to that in Figure 2 helps explain the poorer results among pupils in urban and suburban areas, which have a high proportion of students from so-called foreign backgrounds compared to rural areas (NBE, 2002; Integrationsverket, 2002b). It is not suggested that under-achieving students are in any way less able because of their foreign cultural background, but that language and/or communication difficulties may be the main problem - students are not able to appropriate knowledge communicated to them due to language deficiency, a deficiency that has at least parts of its roots in their current situation (NBE, 2002; Lundh et al, 2002).

The prevailing solution is withdrawal classes for Swedish as a second language - by focussing on the acquisition of the majority language, schools aim to adapt students to society, and by making subject instruction effective they hope to lessen the difference between different groups. Although Swedish as a second language has been taught for some time, it has yet to produce the desired result (SOU 2000:39, 2000): it has been argued that courses in Swedish as a second language create a 'second tier Swedish' which

² See further Thomas & Collier (1997)

results in marginalised groups which are marked by their 'second proficiency' (Thomas & Collier, 1997 and Blob, 2002).

Alternative methods, though changing with local context, share a common focus on mother tongue teaching. These show unequivocally better results; and are increasingly approved. In contrast to previous strategies, mother tongue support and teaching is seen as a resource for the classroom and its students rather than a replacement. In the next section we discuss and analyse one alternative method, aiming to show what can be learned from it (Blob, 2002; Tallberg et al, 2003; Integrationsverket, 2002; NBE, 2002).

The *one-way no-win situation*

Despite the availability of data, the school system seems to have been totally unprepared for the task (NBE 2001; Integrationsverket 2001 and 2002) - a no-win situation where students were neither making the progress required in the majority language nor in any other subjects, while schools were struggling with overworked staff and demands from 'above'. This situation led to easy but short-sighted responses with catastrophic results - a common but unsatisfactory response to the problem was lowering standards, with students learning less and less as a consequence.

Students with insufficient knowledge of the language used for teaching will, for self-evident reasons, be unable to profit by that teaching. Growing up in segregated areas where links with the majority society are already weak, struggling with the majority language and therefore with school in general, pupils have no natural inducements for participation in the learning process. By lowering standards to achievable levels, teachers do not have to fail students and schools do not need to admit to a low number of pupils obtaining passes. However, the result is clearly neither a way forward for the schools nor for society, and even less so for the individual students. By withholding the necessary tools to achieve a subject proficiency equivalent to the majority, schools are denying these pupils the possibilities of negotiating society's different spaces, the school being one of the first: the individual is being robbed of his/her possibilities for action on the same terms as the majority society and therefore the possibility of becoming fully part of that society (see further SOU 2000:39, 2000).

In the processes of constructing their identity, children learn to differentiate between different groups and hierarchies. High rates of inadequate communications skills combined with, and because of, poor educational attainment, concentrated within specific groups, establish social classes or categories of those marked and held back by language. Language, besides being a communicative tool mediating subject content, is used in the process of negotiating subjectivity. Consequently we need to discover how to handle spaces of negotiation while simultaneously mediating subject content.

Kroksbäcksskolan – an example of good practice

In the city of Malmö there is both a high percentage and high numbers of the population with a mother tongue other than Swedish. For example, 78 per cent of the student body at the Kroksbäck school in the municipal of Hyllie do not have Swedish as their mother tongue. The three major languages spoken by pupils are Pashto, Arabic and Albanian. The number of students reaching educational goals has been decreasing over the years, with a correlation between pupils with low proficiency in Swedish and those with the lowest level of general achievement (Blob, 2002).

As a means of reversing this negative trend the school decided, with support from the municipal council, to develop a language support team (Swe.Studieverkstad) consisting of local teachers who spoke the various languages to assist students in their learning process by providing two-way language instruction. The teachers involved were proficient in both Swedish and their students' mother tongue and were able to act as cultural and linguistic translators, breaking down the fixed concentration on Swedish as the language of education, as well as building bridges between the cultures of the students' families and that of the Swedish school system (for further comment on culture and language, see Kubota, 2002). The language support team has proved to be an excellent resource, providing the necessary support and simplifying the communication process while the results, including proficiency in the majority language, improved. The measurable results after the first year included:

- a higher rate of students with a complete education after nine years of study (reaching the goals in all subjects) - from 48 per cent in 2001 to 66 per cent in 2002;
- 68 per cent of the approximately 250 students visiting the language support team showed positive development after just one year of support;
- there was a considerable reduction in the gap between native Swedish-speakers and students with another mother tongue.

Students helped by the team increased their achievement between 2000-2002 by 29 per cent in English, 23 per cent in math and 24 per cent in Swedish. The comparative results for non-participants in the support scheme were 16, 10 and 10 per cent.

Analysis

By problematising how we construct and perceive borders as well as the construction of youth groups in relation to a majority society, the English sociologist McDonald (McDonald, 1999) found that the most vital element in constructing communities of resistance was the use of contrastive language/communication³. Like the young people in McDonald's study, the students in the Swedish compulsory school system are searching for groups and contexts to identify with, though defining themselves by contrasting their own language use to that of the majority society and especially of the authorities. In the process of gaining a position from which to be regarded a vital part of society and from where they can receive positive recognition, the students are using every communicative tool available to them. Rage, language, gestures and simple non-communication can be used as a marker of their sought-after position. In the case of a multilingual environment the language becomes an even more important tool to identify with and through⁴.

In the absence of a social position to affiliate with through the majority language, students not mastering its most basic form have to identify through other means; this will for most be their mother tongues. When school authorities deny students the opportunity to communicate with 'adults' in their mother tongue, the students are more likely to use language as a differential practice (Anzaldúa, 1995). By talking in the *forbidden* and

³ See also Crowley (2001).

⁴ See also Sernhede (1998).

personally-owned language, students exercise some degree of power otherwise inaccessible to them. By denying students the ability to negotiate their identification processes, in or with the help of their principle communicative tool, schools are denying students the ability to present themselves as resourceful individuals. In the absence of spaces of negotiation where students can communicate themselves and their experiences, they may resort to contrastive behaviour, as did the youth in McDonald's study⁵.

Countermeasures – to construct a field of mutual understanding

We advocate a pedagogy of dialogism, i.e. a pro-active practical approach towards 'space-negotiation', as a means of breaking the negative spiral described. Our pedagogic of practised dialogism is primarily based on a philosophy of language by the Bakhtinian Circle (BC) with the dialogue as languages' central theme. Languages are not created in vacuums, and are therefore neither given to us nor created in the individual's consciousness (Vološinov, 1976; Bakhtin 1990 and 1999). Languages are constructed through negotiations of meaning between social beings interacting and, as Vološinov puts it, '[a] word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor' (Vološinov, ¹⁹⁸⁶, 86)

People come to life in the social arena through communication. When we are deprived of the possibility to communicate, or when our endeavour to communicate is made irrelevant, we as individuals become just as irrelevant. Therefore, if we want to keep pupils alive in this sense, we must facilitate their ability to voice their opinions and the cognition of the subject must, accordingly, always stay dialogic. For as Bakhtin says: 'I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup' (Bakhtin, 1990: 12). If individual students are not given the necessary tools to negotiate the different spaces in society, then they are robbed of exactly those spaces or territories where languages are constructed.

Because they function in social environments, individuals have to be considered social beings: hence we treat BC's description of dialogism/dialogics as a philosophical approach towards life. We speak, think, and express ourselves through a variety of means. Even though one could argue that social beings are to be understood by their deeds, these actions will never fully be understood if motives, goals, stimuli, degrees of awareness, etc. (or what BC calls 'the potential signifying expression') are not taken into consideration. The classroom is one of the first arenas outside a young person's family environment where this phenomenon can be studied. Ongoing meetings between teachers and students, and between students and students, take place, text material is used, and spaces of negotiation are negotiated. If we fail to give individual students a voice in this so-called safe environment, a 'worst-case' outcome later on in life might be predictable.

To be able to take part in any dialogue one needs to have a language. We all have languages, but not all of them are always recognised. Vološinov puts it '[a] word is a two-sided act ... it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and

⁵ See also hooks 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,' in *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, (Boston, South End Press 1990), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practical Freedom*, (New York, Routledge, 1994), Parszyk *En skola för andra*, (Stockholm, HLS Förlag, 1999), *Yalla—det är bråttom*, (Lund, Studentlitteratur, 2002).

listener, addresser and addressee' (Vološinov, 1986: 86). Similarly, we understand the world through the languages which we master, and the standardised language through knowledge of the country where it is spoken. To indulge in any discussion a knowledge base is needed as point of reference. If students have neither a sufficient level of the standardised language and do not therefore attain a sufficient grasp of the curriculum, then they will never be able to catch up with the majority society. This is the negative spiral mentioned. As a countermeasure we need to open up as many possibilities as possible for negotiations of space, i.e. we need to provide tools necessary for a dialogue, the basis for any type of negotiation. These tools consist of more than any standardised version of a language: they are being composed of all the different elements of life and are therefore context-dependent. A major part of this knowledge base is obtained through the subjects taught in classrooms.

Thus we argue for a change of focal point from second-language acquisition to first language content instruction, which will enable students to catch up on their language skills, while not being slowed down or hindered from making progress in remaining subjects of the curriculum. Through open and honest dialogues, both students and teachers are thus able to negotiate their spaces.

Conclusion: parallel monologues or mutual dialogues – to learn or to be taught

We have argued that the situation in the compulsory school system in contemporary Swedish society is unsatisfactory. Despite much research about both about the situation and its roots, little is changing. National strategies which have been implemented are far from achieving the desired effect, mainly because these strategies are not anchored in the experienced reality. We have argued that there is a need to broaden the understanding of language from a mediator of subject content to include negotiation of subjectivity. In this sense language becomes an important part in the identification process and therefore an important part of the student's strategy to gain a position for him/herself.

The school we have cited as an example uses a multilingual staff and students as resources to initiate communication and to break the negative learning spiral. By complementing the existing mainly one-way approach toward language, communication and teaching with a dialogic two-way practical approach toward language and communication, schools can provide an inviting environment open for negotiations of space, and therefore also for the creation of self thinking social beings who are allowed to learn.

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