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A Visit to a multicultural school: a case study in Finland

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Abstract

The number of immigrants in Finland has increased rapidly during the past 15 years, and this has had an influence on schools. The Finnish authorities have responded by giving instructions on providing multicultural education. Some student teachers have difficulties encounter multiculturalism in practice because of the small number of non-Finnish pupils. To develop the students' identity as teachers in multicultural society, a group of students visited a multicultural school in Helsinki. The students had an opportunity to attend classes and interview the teachers and pupils. Later on they reported their experiences, and all reports were very positive. The experience was important for the students, because during their school time there were not many immigrants among the pupils.

Multiculturalism has become a reality in the Finnish society during the past 15 years. In 1990, there were 26,255 immigrants in Finland, and by the end of 2005 the number had increased to 113,852. At present, approximately 3% of the country's population of 5 255 580 are immigrants. Most of the immigrants live in Southern Finland, and for example in the capital region of Helsinki, the immigrant population makes up to 8% of the total population. The number of different mother tongues spoken by the immigrant population adds up to 60 in the Southern Finnish city of Turku, for example. The largest immigrant groups in Finland are from Russia, Sweden, Somalia, Serbia and Montenegro, Iraq and China.

The University of Joensuu has a Practice School in connection with the Savonlinna Department of Teacher Education. The University Practice School hosts 390 pupils, of whom only four are immigrants. Due to the small number of non-Finnish pupils, the class teacher students cannot encounter multiculturalism in practice or train with immigrants. To develop the students' identity as teachers in multicultural society, a group of students visited a multicultural school in Helsinki. The present paper is 1) a short look at the history of multiculturalism in Finland; 2) a brief overview of the National Board of Education's expectations of schools, municipalities and teachers in terms of multicultural education; and 3) a report of the students' ideas of multicultural society and the school visit.

A short look at the history of multiculturalism in Finland

Because of its low immigration rate, Finland is often regarded as relatively homogenous in terms of its ethno-cultural variations. The similarities in Finnish national features are stressed more than the differences. Ninety per cent of the Finnish people speak Finnish as their mother tongue, and 86 per cent are members of the Lutheran state church. Finnish and

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Swedish are the official languages of the country, and there are over 10 000 Roma people in Finland.

Immigration is not a new phenomenon in Finland. Finland has a long history of belonging to either Sweden or Russia. Finland was part of Sweden up until 1809, when it was lost to Russia. The Swedish heritage is the western culture, Lutheran church and the Swedish language. Moreover, the Finnish peasants have never been serfs like their peers in Russia. During the Russian time, Finland developed as a state, and nationalism was a trend in Europe. In Finland, nationalism was demonstrated in the form of developing Finnish composition (*Sibelius*), the arts (*Gallen-Kallela*, *Edefelt* etc.) and writing: *Lönnrot* collected the Finnish national epic, *Kalevala*. After a period of autonomy and two eras of oppression under the Russian rule, Finland became independent in 1917. After the World War II, Finland lost its eastern regions of Karelia and Petsamo, and during the Cold War, Finland resettled 400 000 Karelian people and Finnish soldiers. They received land and a very good loan to build new houses and set up more fields. The rest of the loan was forgiven. At the same time, Finland had to pay Russia large war indemnities, which it managed to settle in full by 1952. The 400 000 people who had been resettled after the war quite often moved closer to their home districts or into cities. This migration and the migration of the Finnish rural people into cities initiated one of the most significant social changes in the Finnish history. The resettled people often had difficulties in finding their identity in the new areas although the language was Finnish. It was easier for the young. The problems of the resettled in society or in schools were not discussed openly at that time. Finland was proud of having been able to manage the hardships caused by the wars in a well-organised manner. At that time and long after, Finland thought that it is necessary to take in more immigrants and refugees from other countries, as many Finnish people migrated to Sweden in hope of finding work. (Hämynen and Lahti, 1983; Uusikylä, 2002) Finland's economy grew rapidly after the 1950s. Many Finnish emigrants to Sweden came back, but they were not unfamiliar with the Finnish society.

Refugee reception in its modern form began in 1973 when the Finnish Government decided to take a group of 200 refugees from Chile. In 1979, Finland took refugees from Vietnam and continued to do so on an annual basis. Vietnamese were the largest group of refugees until 1992. After 1991, Finland also began to take in Iranians, Kurds from Iraq and Iran, and later on people from camps in the former Yugoslavia and their family members within the quota framework. Since 1992, the largest refugee group has been the asylum-seeking Somalis. In 1992, the Finnish ancestry Ingrians from the former Soviet Union began to immigrate to Finland. At the end of 2006 Finland had 121 739 immigrants, 7887 more than a year earlier. (Matinheikki-Kokko and Pitkänen, 2002, Statistics Finland 2007)

The National Board of Education's expectations of schools, municipalities and teachers in terms of multicultural education

The policies and educational programmes on multiculturalism have been implemented since the 1980s, and they adhere to the relevant legislation. The objective of immigrant education

in Finland is to provide people moving to Finland with opportunities to function as equal members of the Finnish society. Children permanently residing in Finland, including foreign nationals, are subjected to compulsory education. Compulsory education means completion of the basic education syllabus. Compulsory education starts in the year when the child turns seven.

Usually, children coming from other countries are placed in a group that corresponds to their knowledge and skills. It is possible for the child to receive a special syllabus for immigrants. Schools organise remedial instruction for immigrant children in different subjects according to their capabilities. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2007)

The compulsory education is free of charge for the permanently residing immigrants aged 7-17. Instruction in the Swedish or Finnish language is organised as well. The municipalities are obliged to organise teaching in the child's mother tongue and religion if the study group includes three pupils who have the same language or religion. Organisation of teaching in the child's native language is voluntary. The municipalities decide in their curricula how teaching of the native language, religion or ethical studies is arranged.

Finland has a Non-Discrimination Act (L21/2004), whose purpose is to foster and safeguard equality in society. The Act prohibits discrimination based on age, ethnic or national origin, language, religion, beliefs, opinions, health, disability and sexual orientation. Responsibility for the students', especially immigrants', educational equity is included in the teachers' duties. The teachers should notice the immigrant pupils' backgrounds and their impact on the reflection and teaching situations. Multiculturalism in education policy is a vague term. Immigrants' acclimatisation (acculturation) to the new culture can be described with the concepts of integration, assimilation, isolation (separatism) or marginalisation. Marginalisation refers to a situation where the foreign culture is refused. Acclimatisation (acculturation), on the other hand, can stress or even destroy the cultural and psychological character of the individual.

According to some Finnish research, a successful integration requires acculturation into the new organisation (functional assimilation). Immigrants should know and respect the roots of their own culture and yet be able to integrate into the Finnish culture. (Talib, 2002)

Problems will arise when immigrants do not understand the old and the new culture well enough. Second generation immigrants live between two cultures. For them it is difficult to understand the new culture, but they do not know sufficiently about their parents' culture either. Immigrants seldom assimilate to the new culture totally. They will mix the cultures even if they can speak Finnish and are able to operate in the new culture. We have to remember that traditional family values and strong solidarity can create a border against the predominant culture (Talib, 2002). In the global and multicultural capitalistic world economy, a hard and fast definition of culture is impossible. This diffusion of world economy, westernisation and fusion of local cultures has been referred to as creolisation (the

fusion of cultures). Finland also received influences from Sweden and Russia, but it has its own traditions and culture as well.

Multiculturalism is not a new phenomenon in the Finnish society. It has been a reality already before when the teachers and pupils came from different social backgrounds. Today the diversity of cultures, especially of languages, ethnicities and religions is in a new way an important question.

Visit to a multicultural school with a group of class teacher students

Thirty-one class teacher students from different parts of Finland studying at the Savonlinna Department of Teacher Education were asked to answer an inquiry on multiculturalism. Eighteen of the students reported that during their school years in the nine-year comprehensive school and in the three-year secondary school, there were no pupils from foreign countries. Seven of the students had had an immigrant in the same school, and four of those students went to school in Eastern Finland. One of the immigrants was from Vietnam, three from Russia, two from Estonia and one from Africa. Six students reported that they had had more than one immigrant in their school. Two of them had had only two immigrants: the one was in a school with two immigrants from Yugoslavia and the other was in a school with an immigrant from Turkey and Russia, respectively. The rest four students reported that the immigrants in their schools came from Russia. Only one student said that they had many immigrants. The students also answered to another question concerning the stereotypes connected with some nationalities. This question was taken from teaching material for the education of multiculturalism. The students drew a mind map of the stereotypes of Russian, Swedish, Estonian, etc. people. They all had the typical stereotypes that we are used to having in Europe. We also discussed the stereotypical Finn in the eyes of other Europeans.

Student teachers at the University Practice School in Savonlinna cannot encounter multiculturalism in practice because of the small number (4) of non-Finnish pupils. To develop the students' identity as teachers in multicultural society, a group of students visited a multicultural school in Helsinki in autumn 2006. Before the study visit to the multicultural school in Helsinki, the students were given the assignment of getting acquainted with the Finnish National Board of Education's regulations on multicultural education.

Fifteen per cent of the school's 500 pupils have some other nationality than Finnish. Additionally, many of the pupils have Finnish nationality, but their parents are immigrants. The rector and teachers introduced the system they have for dealing with multicultural issues with pupils, parents, classes, etc. The students could also attend classes. The students reported that they were genuinely surprised at the number of cultures and differences in languages and religions. This is understandable, because during their school years the students mainly did not have immigrants at school. Multiculturalism in its modern form is a new phenomenon in the Finnish society.

The students could see in practice how pupils with English as their mother tongue were treated in classes. They could study English with the more advanced classes and get extra exercises. Some pupils had difficulties to understand English or Finnish and their mother tongue was Arabic or some other language that the others could not understand.

The teachers stressed that each of the pupils is an individual. The teachers are not able to know beforehand whether the parents and families have a strong traditional lifestyle or not. For example, in some cultures the tradition prohibits a man from greeting a female teacher by shaking hands. Some families from the same culture adhere to the tradition while others do not. The teachers emphasised the importance of knowing the background of the families and pupils. They pointed out that for example Russian pupils generally have a strong respect for the school as a tradition. They also have models from previous generations as regards how to act at school. In some collective cultures, the traditions and their continuation may be given more importance. The individual is expected to continue the tradition and school does not play an important role in it. For the Finnish and immigrant pupils it is important to consider the educational level of the parents, because well-educated parents' children generally succeed better at school than the children of poorly educated parents.

The students were satisfied with the school visit. They experienced that the visit was a very good way to get concrete information about the changing Finnish society and multiculturalism in Finland and especially in the Helsinki region. They also admired the teachers' patience with all cultures and situations that they encountered during the day.

Conclusion

Modern multiculturalism in Finland is a very new phenomenon, although we have a long history of Swedish and Russian influences on our culture. The roots of the Finnish culture lie in the Western culture, Lutheran faith and free peasants representing the cultural heritage of Sweden. During the Russian period, Finland found its nationality as the European countries did in 17th century and in the beginning of the 1900s.

Not all departments of teacher education have a model on how to teach and encounter different cultures at school and in the society. Students at such departments can read the instructions and regulations of the Finnish Government and the Finnish National Board of Education, but reality may confuse them if they do not get the proper multiculturalism education and the support of the society, municipalities and colleagues.

The model in practice is a concrete and useful way to open the eyes of the student teachers. It is also a good way to practice multiculturalism in controlled circumstances.

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