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The Discourse of Difference

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Abstract

In this paper I reconstruct research with the explicit aims of exploring and analysing processes of normalisation and integration of children with immigrant backgrounds into pre-school. By placing empirical results from research in a new theoretical context, I want to understand how dominant discourses of ethnotism and essentialism produce difference making in the educational system. The results presented are a part of a major project, sponsored by the Swedish Research Council, on conditions for learning in pre-school. The aim of this paper is to:

- *explore the production of difference in pre-school, as it is presented in research;*
- *show how processes of separation, ascription and internalisation work within discourses of essentialism and ethnotism;*
- *discuss resistance to the dominant discourses of essentialism and ethnotism.*

Background

Sweden has during the last decades often been described as a multi-cultural society. There are reasons to question if this is a new phenomenon. Sweden, like all other countries, has always been divided in relation to class, gender, education and property, in this sense, Sweden has also previously been multi-cultural. But, there are reasons to talk about a new multi-cultural society with respect to the numerous groups of labour related immigration and political refugees, which have arrived in Sweden from the 1950s. In my hometown, Malmö, there are 169 different nationalities, 147 different languages are spoken, not including the Nordic languages, and more than 50 percent of children in pre-school have an immigrant background.

Pre-school has been a part of immigration politics and, since the 1990s, part of integration policy. More than 80 percent of the children aged 1-5 attend pre-school and for new migrant families the pre-school is an important step to integration. Pre-school activities are important in developing children's identity as a citizen (Lunneblad, 2006). An important task of the pre-school is to establish and help children acquire the values upon which Swedish society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders, as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable, are all values that pre-school should actively promote in its work with children. Pre-school is seen as a social and cultural meeting place, which can reinforce the ability of people to live with and understand values in cultural diversity and prepare children for life in an increasingly international community.

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In the pre-school curriculum it is emphasized that children should be aware of their own cultural heritage and participate in the culture of others. Pre-school should help to ensure that children from national minorities and children with a foreign background receive support in developing a multi-cultural identity. Children with a foreign background, whilst developing their first language, should also have the opportunity to learn Swedish as well as developing knowledge in other areas. One important question for researchers is, therefore, to understand how teachers in pre-school handle diversity.

Research on diversity in pre-school

Klerfelt (2002) and Lind (2001) find in their research summaries that the pre-school's role in a multi-cultural society has not interested Swedish researchers to much of a degree during the 1980s and 1990s. In an overview (Tallberg Broman, Rubinstein Reich and Hägerström, 2002) on educational research with class, gender and ethnicity perspectives, it becomes clear that research about pre-school on the basis of these perspectives is not so well represented. Then, we may take into consideration that the three mentioned overviews describe research during the 1990s and earlier; cultural, ethnic and religious differences are more emphasized in later research on diversity.

We and the Other

Ehn (1986) finds, in his early study from the 1980s, many examples of how cultural differences were made invisible and few examples of national rhetoric and symbolism. He means that both teachers and children ignore national and cultural differences. The result of this process is that the Swedish majority culture will be considered as natural, even if this is not articulated. When Ronström, Runfors and Wahlström (1998) analyse "Kindergarten culture" in pre-schools ten years later, they find many similarities with Ehn's findings. Instead of understanding cultural differences as different values, teachers in pre-school tend to understand diversity as a process of adjustment to what they consider to be natural and normal. The researchers find that "Swedishness" becomes more important. Pre-school teachers say that they want to provide Swedish culture for their children. It is above all the Swedish language, the traditions and the nature in Sweden that they give emphasis to, concepts that can be seen as metaphors for a Swedish identity.

Lunneblad (2006) analyses pre-school's commissions and function as an arena for integration in a multi-cultural society. His study aims to analyse how pre-schools produce and reproduce identities in relation to the society's cultural diversity. Theoretically, pre-school is seen as a public institution in relation to a political and economic context and an arena for production and reproduction of meaning, social identities and positions. Lunneblad finds that teachers in pre-school articulate what they mean by a multi-cultural approach on the basis of different contexts of meaning. In one of the pre-school departments in his study, multi-cultural education is related to the children's development within a developmental psychological discourse. In the other department, multi-cultural education is related to the children's ethnic, cultural and national identity. In both departments there is an uncertainty about what a multi-cultural approach is and how it should be implemented. The discussions are to a large extent about how the objectives should be formulated in writing. The result of his study shows

that the ideological effect of how the teachers are handling diversity is that diversity is made invisible in practice. Diversity is invisible partly because the teachers are avoiding talking about differences among the children; instead they emphasize what is common. They talk about the importance of treating all children alike.

Diversity and normalisation

Diversity concerns normalising practice in relation to several aspects; here, this is illustrated with research about institutional practice, individual development plans and children in need of special aids. The question, if the Swedish pre-school is a community for normalisation, is explored by Markström (2005). The study is based on field studies in two pre-schools over the period of a year. She made observations of the pre-school's activities and interviewed children, parents and teachers. By analysing how pre-school is talked about and the actions taking place, Markström is discussing the pre-school as a community for social practice. The agent's action is operating within the institutional frames and constitutes social practice in pre-school; agents and structure are, therefore, mutually established. In order to understand the social practice that is not visible, what Markström calls the everyday life's hidden agenda or imminent pedagogy, the everyday life of unspoken rules and procedures that are created and maintained through practice is analysed. The aim is to understand, which the title of the dissertation states, how the pre-school's agents relate to what is valued as normal or deviating in children's behaviour and attributes.

Markström finds that pre-school can be characterised as an institution at the point of intersection between institution and home. It is an institutional hybrid that she describes and the study explores the contradictory expectations and requirements that create a variety of social practices in pre-school. She points out that the pre-school's daily activities are homelike, institutional and public. The normal child is constructed on the basis of gender and age, and teachers and parents express images about children which are essential and natural. The child is conformed into what is considered to be normal and normality is constructed in the institutional context of pre-school. With the concept of institutionally situated normality Markström claims that the social construction of normality is institutionally connected and dependent upon situation.

Successful projects

The research presented above provides evidence that pre-school, like other public institutions, emphasizes assimilation and adaptation to the institutional norm. There is, however, research that gives what I see as a somewhat brighter picture of the situation.

In a documentation of two years' work with non discrimination, anti-racism and empathy, Norell Beach (1998) shows that deliberate work with teachers in pre-school can bridge prejudices and stereotypical images about "the Other". A condition is that teachers must be given opportunities to reflect in groups and networks, with guidance this can lead to a more deliberately multi-cultural education. This is in line with what Sjöwall (1994) finds in a project about multi-cultural education and anti-racism in pre-school and school. Obondo (2005) examines in a project how children with languages of a Somali origin develop literacy in a pre-school. A bilingual assistant works in the pre-

school with two Swedish speaking teachers. Obondo finds that the quality of interaction depends on which language is being used. The dialogues in Somali between the bilingual assistant and the children have a situation-centered touch, i.e. the dialogues take their starting point in common experiences that the assistant shares with the children. The situation-centered dialogue is governed by the children's own questions and broadens their understanding of the situation and context. The dialogues in Swedish have a more child-centered nature. Obondo claims that these dialogues are more limiting for the children. She emphasizes the importance of bilingual competence to bridge cultural differences.

Boundaries of institutional normality

The boundaries of normality become, perhaps, most clear in definitions and formulations of what distinguishes divergence from the norm. Lutz (2006) describes how agents formulate divergences on the basis of what is understood by the concept "children in need of special aids". It is a critical case study that aims to describe the practice of assessing pre-school children's development. One conclusion is that the construction and articulation of the deviating child is related to power relations among professionals involved in the process. Psychiatrists and psychologists' assessments and diagnoses of the individual child diverge from the relational image of discrepancies that teachers formulate. The teachers' assessment is linked to specific behavioural patterns in the children's everyday life. They ask for special individual training for the child outside the group, which, according to Lutz, means segregation as a solution to a problem that is about relations. He sees a tendency for professionals to put the problems on the child's shoulder and he interprets this as a way to replicate prevailing public structures.

Vallberg Roth and Månsson (2007) discover the same tendency when they describe the content in individual development plans (IDP) for pre-school and pre-school class children. IDP has been mandatory since January 1 2006 in compulsory schools in Sweden, but not for pre-schools. Initiatives have, however, been taken in the municipalities since the end of the 1990s to formulate IDP in pre-school and pre-school classes. Vallberg Roth and Månsson analyse 82 individual development plans from four municipalities: three urban municipalities and one rural district municipality. On the basis of their content analysis they find three significant place and institutional normalities in the IDP.

1. The school subject regulated normal child.
2. Socially and linguistically regulated multi-cultural children (in heterogeneous urban municipal area).
3. Primary need regulated mono-cultural children (in the rural district).

Place dimension and institutional context govern the content in IDP more than curricula on national and municipal levels. Swedish and other languages are matters that are common for all municipalities, while an inter-cultural content is basically missing. A mono-lingual norm for multi-lingual children is present in the documents, which is a conclusion that is confirmed by the research presented above.

A theoretical reconstruction

The research presented above illustrates that pre-school in Sweden is an institution within a discourse of normality, which defines a *We* and the *Other(s)*. Cultural diversity is transformed into a discourse of what it is to be different from being Swedish (Ronström, Runfors & Wahlström, 1998). Lutz (ibid) stresses the tendency to put the problems on the children to regulate institutional normality. Vallberg Roth and Månsson (ibid) find that a mono-lingual norm for multi-lingual children is seen in individual development plans (IDP) for pre-school and pre-school class children. Research is showing that teachers' belief of what characterises ethnic and national identities guides them in their articulation and practice of multi-cultural education. Lunneblad (ibid) describes several situations when teachers want to implement multi-cultural education in pre-school. Multi-cultural education is then articulated as an objective or a goal for the Other. It is focused on traditions, songs and rhymes of the immigrant children with links to their ethnic, cultural and national identities.

In the research presented above, researchers use different theoretical concepts to understand and explain why pre-school seems to be an institution for normalisation rather than diversity. I will not use their theoretical concepts; instead my reconstruction of the research intends placing the results in a somewhat different theoretical frame. My ambition is not to *deconstruct* the research (Johnson, 1994), instead I *reconstruct* the results presented above by placing them into a new theoretical frame; the discourses of essentialism and ethnotism. I use the term discourses to explore institutionalised ways of thinking. Discourse according to Foucault (1972) operates by rules of exclusion and *produces* power relations in society.

Essentialism – a prescribed manuscript

First of all I will define essentialism as the prescribed manuscript that we use to characterise the Other. The processes of separation, ascription and internalisation are used to explore how a discourse of essentialism produces the Other.

The first and most fundamental part of essentialism is *separation*. When cultural diversity is formulated as the idea of someone who is different and separated from (the image of) the majority culture it produces the Other. Separation is based on the idea of the purity of cultures and cultures are imagined to be stable and static. In real life, immigrant children use their every day experiences to construct hybrid culture patterns as a result of many different learning experiences. A multi-contextual childhood is made up of children's experiences of social learning from friends, other families, neighborhood and pre-school. The discourse of separation, however, neglects hybrid culture patterns and preserves pure mono cultures by ascription.

The second concept, *ascription*, describes how separation is maintained when we categorise individuals and attribute to them specific characteristics. In a lecture to a Japanese audience Bourdieu (1995) warns the listeners to interpret his concept of habitus from a substantial view. The substantial (or essential) way of thinking, which is recognisable as common sense but also as racism, means that you regard the activities of individuals or groups, in a certain society and in a specific point of time, as hereditary

characteristics. In the research presented above I used examples from studies with explicit focus on diversity to show that teachers in pre-school often ascribe children with different ethnic backgrounds than Swedish, with certain cultural characteristics. The discourse of essentialism produces the Other when we ascribe characteristics for individuals who belong to different categories: class, gender, ethnicity and generation are some of the categories often used in research and daily life (Riggins, 1997).

The discourse of essentialism means that you attribute an individual with a single cultural identity, so you do not see the complexity of multiple identities or the hybrid cultures. The Nobel Prize winner in Economics, Sen (2006), writes in his book "Violence and Identities" that people often are refused to be seen as individuals with multiple identities. The idea of a single identity makes it easy to attribute and ascribe the Other(s) characteristics as part of their cultural heritage. The essential way of recognising culture is to imagine it as a pure entity of shared values, meanings, linguistic signs and symbols.

In everyday life we are members of different groups and we belong to them all. A woman's citizenship, living area, geographical heritage, gender, class, political engagement, profession, the music she listens to or the food she eats makes her a member in many different associations. In each of these collectives she "produces identity" and none of them can be held as the only identity or primary belonging. The essential view, however, neglects this complexity of multiple belongings and culture as human practices and reduces identity to a single category and culture to a pure entity.

A consequence of separation is the *internalisation* of a single (group) identity based on the ascribed characteristics. If a discourse identifies children, with another ethnic background than Swedish, as someone who does not belong to the common majority culture, then the language ascribes those characteristics as descriptive of self and identity. If cultural identities are descriptive then those descriptors stabilise subjectivity and reinscribe existing power relations. Internalisation of a single (group) identity means that individuals ignore their shifting identities and talk and act as if they occupy a fixed identity or position. An internalised, fixed ethnic and cultural identity mirrors the manuscript that ascribes characteristics for ethnicity and culture, but in different ways. Some will internalise an identity in opposition to what they recognise as the majority culture ascription.

So far, I have used the discourse of essentialism to describe processes of separation ascription and internalisation in order to understand the consequences of institutional normalisation. Essentialism has been defined as the prescribed manuscript that we use to characterise the Other. Now I will introduce the concept of ethnotism in order to understand the return of ethnicity and culture as important essential categories.

Ethnotism – the return of ethnicity and culture

Motturi (2007) claims that *the return* of the concepts culture and ethnicity is best understood in terms of globalisation and post colonialism in our age of multi-cultural societies and nations. In this sense, culture/ethnicity is a substitute for race, with the same function of constructing differences. Ethnotism has its roots in the history of

difference making, when the categories of language, religion, evolution and race legitimised oppression, discrimination and exclusion. When ethnicity and culture relate to a multi and inter-cultural society it creates a difference, based on ethnical and cultural beliefs of heritage. This is what Motturi defines as *ethnotism*. With the concept he analyses the transformation of racism to discourses of ethnicity/culture. The discourses of ethnicity and culture produce differences as a way of maintaining power relations in a multi-cultural society.

Our age is, with Motturi's words, obsessed with ethnicity and the importance of ethnic origin and operates in public institutions as well in everyday life. Ethnicity has become the most significant mark of identity construction in a society which bears the stamp of multi-culturalism and pluralism. Claims concerning ethnic identity can be understood as post colonial effects of the relations between colonized people and nations. When ethnic identity and culture are seen as a whole, the discourse of ethnotism consolidates the structures of power that takes differences between the observer and the ethnic Other as given. Motturi would say that the ethnic Other is fixed into certain positions of difference within the discourse of ethnotism (ethnicity/culture).

Discussion

In this paper I reconstruct research with a focus on institutional normalisation and multi-cultural education in pre-school by using the discourses of essentialism and ethnotism. In doing so, the production of the Other was revealed in processes of separation, ascription and internalisation. In educational settings (e.g. pre-school) the discourse of ethnotism produces difference through articulation of ethnicity and culture as combined pure entities. It was concluded that the discourse of essentialism linked to ethnicity/culture ascribes the Other a singular identity.

Discourses of essentialism and ethnotism are, of course, problematic not only for pre-school but for the educational system as a whole. Research shows that, within the discourse of multi-cultural education, teachers are constructing differences by using the concepts of culture, education and immigration to define who is excluded and included. The emphasis on differences between Western and non-European cultures is highlighted in research (Osman, 1999; Parszyk, 1999). Research shows that school reproduces mono-cultural patterns and discriminates against students with immigrant backgrounds (Ljungberg, 2005; Brömsen von, 2003).

What are possible answers to the discourses of essentialism and ethnotism? From a philosophical point of view, Motturi takes a somewhat pessimistic standpoint when he concludes that the answer could not be formulated in terms of rational reasoning; the discourse of ethnotism is much more powerful than rationality and he suggests a strategy of silence. This is, however, not a standpoint that I find useful in educational settings.

From a political social constructivist perspective Benhabib (1992, 2002) says that we all engage in discourses with an assumed background. "Discourses are procedures of recursive validation through which abstract norms and principles are concretised and legitimised." (Benhabib, 2002, p 12). I want to draw two conclusions from that quote. Firstly, we may all claim that we respect the Other in an abstract meaning, but we cannot

know what such respect requires or entails in actions. Even if the intentions are good (“Somali children must be proud of their culture”) the image of what it means to belong to a Somali culture is attributed to the children. But we do not know the consequences of that attribution. Secondly, the participants might subject these assumed background interpretations to inter-subjective validation. The evaluation and validation of the teacher’s effort is then done in deliberative communication. Benhabib emphasizes that deliberative democracy processes is a way to handle philosophical universalism and the claims of culture. For Benhabib, discursive democracy is the answer to the challenge of diversity. It is possible to create a third-space (English, 2005) where deliberative communication can take place. The notion of deliberative education emphasizes the function of communication as a way to bridge the gap between the We and the Other(s).

Finally, inter-cultural education is a synthesis of the learning from multi-cultural and anti-racist education approaches that were commonly used internationally from the 1960s to the 1990s. In inter-cultural education socialisation, learning and teaching in global, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic contexts are objects for research. This is done in order to develop teachers’ competence and their understanding of cultural impact on students’ development and learning (Lahdenperä, 2004). The content, teaching and organisation in a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic school should then be adjusted to students’ cultural belonging and language. Within *this* conception and understanding of inter-cultural education it is, however, hard to find challenges to resist the discourses of essentialism and ethnotism. This representation of inter-cultural education indicates a construction of identity through the image of cultural pureness. To that I will quote Benhabib:

Philosophically, I do not believe in the purity of cultures, or even the possibility of identifying them as meaningfully discrete wholes. I think of cultures as complex human practices of signification and representation, of organisation and attribution, which are internally driven by conflicting narratives. (Benhabib, 2002, s. ix)

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