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Cross-community work in schools: reflections from a Malmö context

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Abstract

Cross-community work is a method to work against social injustice by letting two groups of people with different economic, ethnic or religious background meet for mutual experience. Two school classes, during the school years 3-5, from two very different districts of the segregated city of Malmö, have met regularly. The aims have been, when working together, the children should get a deeper understanding and knowledge of each other and the possibility to get new friends with another background than themselves. The overall aim was to fight prejudice and segregation. A Research Circle is a dialogue meeting with teachers and researchers from Malmö University. In such a Research Circle during the school year 2009, teachers working in the above mentioned school classes, reflected on their experiences of cross community work together with me as a researcher. In the paper I will describe and discuss teachers reflected experiences on concrete actions and why some school class meetings but not others, in their opinion, could be seen as good examples but not others. The dialogue schoolwork as Cross-community work, in the paper, is discussed and linked to the Contact hypothesis.

Keywords: *Contact hypothesis, Cross-community work, prejudice, Dialogue school, segregation*

Introduction

1. Malmö context

Malmö, a city in southern Sweden, has a very mixed population. Of the city's 300 000 inhabitants, 30%, about 100 000, have backgrounds other than Swedish, as defined either both parents or they themselves were born in another country and they represent 176 nations. It speaks 140 languages. The population is very young, 40% below 35 years of age. 60% of the schoolchildren have another background than Swedish. 20-25% of the schoolchildren did not achieve the goals in the ninth grade in compulsory school in 2010/2011 (Områdesfakta, Malmö, 2011). According to Salonen (2010), 31% of families in Malmö are counted as poor. Throughout, child poverty in Sweden is highest in the country's metropolitan areas and lowest in the prosperous municipalities surrounding the big cities. Between the districts in the cities is even greater variation, from Torslanda in Gothenburg, (2.0 percent) to Rosengård in Malmö (61.4 percent) (Salonen, 2010, p. 10).

The definition of poor child-families in the above mentioned study two separate dimensions is used in its poverty index:

- Low income standard
- Income support (welfare)

This definition includes children in families having either low income standard or security benefit, as poor. This means that the overlap - children in families that have both low income standard and security allowance be discounted (otherwise these families counted twice (Salonen 20010:29). Low income standard means that the family does not have an income that covers reasonable living expenses. Poverty limit as 60% of the country's median income is now used by the EU statistical agency Eurostat (previously used by Eurostat, 50% limit), while the OECD in comparisons between member countries draw the line at 50% of median income.

1.1 *Local variations*

School A is situated in a low status district. The district has 21 904 inhabitants and 60% of them have backgrounds other than Swedish, the majority from Iraq, Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon and Somalia. 70% of the inhabitants are below 44 years of age. Median disposable income pro family is 180 061 SEK. The number of children 0-17 of age living in poor families is 61.5% (Områdesfakta, Malmö, 2011). The district itself is segregated and practically none of the children in school A has Swedish background (teacher information).

School B is situated in a high status district. The district has 37 059 inhabitants and 14% of them have backgrounds other than Swedish, the big majority come from Denmark but some also from Poland, Germany, Finland and Iran. The number of children 0-17 of age living in poor families is 10,6% (Områdesfakta, Malmö, 2011). Inhabitants from Denmark could include people born in other countries, some of them have moved to Sweden as a result of Danish immigrant laws and marriage (Cederberg and Lingärde, 2008).

The alarming situation in some of the districts in Malmö, specially segregation, high unemployment rates, a rising trend of xenophobia and stereotyping and especially the low school achievement rates that is the lowest in Sweden, made the Council of the City of Malmö to decide to frame dialogue school work and to finance it through the City well-fare program, Good life for all, (Swe: Välfärd för alla). This particular dialogue school work (*Swe dialogskola, vänskola*) means that two schools shall be in dialogue, one of them with low effectiveness and one of them with high. Concrete activities shall take place were children from both schools meet.

In the paper I see this particular dialogue schoolwork as Cross community work (CCW) (Dickson and Doherty, 1993; Orton, 2008; 2009) because the work was carried out between schools situated in different districts in the city. The main reason for the dialogue schoolwork was to reduce prejudice and xenophobia. The need of theory-based inventions is stressed. In the discussion I use the Contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) in order to get a deeper understanding of why some but not other activities may support processes that could diminish prejudice.

Theory and definitions

2. The Contact hypothesis

Prejudice is stereotyping an entire group out of generalisations and incomplete information. The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) claims that prejudice should diminish when groups in conflict get to know each other and learn more about each other. He meant, that even though to category is necessary in every day life, this is not always done on rational terms. An irrational stereotyped category is made out of too little knowledge of a group or phenomenon. However, he stressed that contact between ethnic groups could as well reduce prejudice as well increase prejudice. He pointed out some ideally conditions when prejudice can be reduced.

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e. by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups. (Allport, 1954, p. 281)

The contact work needs to be carefully considered and planned if not prejudice and stereotype shall increase. Pettigrew (1998, pp. 66-76) states five conditions that are essential when working with groups in order to fight stereotypes:

- The same status in the situation
- Common goals or task
- Cooperation within the group
- Support from authority, law
- Potential for friendship

Within a given situation/activity the groups must hold equal status, experienced by both groups. Important is that they shall solve a common task or move towards a common goal that both groups find important or fun. It must be carried out through cooperation between the groups and not by competition. Contact between the groups may be facilitated if it is officially supported e.g. as school activity.

According to the hypothesis, Pettigrew means, that prejudices can be reduced when the above given conditions are at hand. But prejudice, in spite of good intentions, can even rise and groups be seen even more stereotyped than before, if the actions that take place are carried out not according to the five conditions. And even if they are, the group members must be recognised by the other group as representatives of the group/category, if not, new experiences of acting and personality could be interpreted as exceptions and that the person or group of persons is not representative. The situation must give the participating people possibility to be friends. To reach a level of friendship-making, is necessary in order to support the processes that occur to continue to work and be generalised beyond a situation that was created in group meetings / activities. The possibility of generalisation is due to that the participants see each other as representatives of their group / category. Pettigrew stresses that the work must be looked

upon as overlapping long-term processes and not as some isolated actions. Long-term relationship work is necessary, also a finding by Orton (2008, p. 24). Pettigrew points out the importance of reaching the level of friendship and if the four other conditions (status, goal, cooperation, official support) are at hand there is a potential for new friendship.

2.1 Cross Community Work

The dialogue schoolwork was officially supported and decided by the City and can be seen as a specific invention from top-bottom known as Social planning.

A so-called top-bottom invention as Community work is named Social Planning. Twelvetrees (2002, p. 79) defines it as.

Community workers undertake many activities other than assisting community groups to run their own activities or projects. These can range from doing minor thing for groups all the way to planning and implementing large-scale projects with limited or no references to community groups.

More recently used terms for social planning are “programme bending” or ” inter-agency work”.

Cross-community work (See Dickson & Doherty, 1993; Orton, 2008; 2009) is a method to work against social injustice by letting two groups of people with different economic, ethnic or religious background meet for mutual experience. In this paper dialogue schoolwork as CCW, the Contact hypothesis is seen as the theoretical base.

2.2 Dialogue schoolwork and CCW

The dialogue schoolwork was not a demand from community groups, rather on the contrary among some parents with children in school B, but was instead a political decision from the left-wing parties that rules Malmö and was supported by the administration. The School leaders in some chosen districts in Sweden with week school rates got the possibility to apply to take part in a Language project 2006-2008 financed by the State (*Sve:Myndigheten för skolutveckling*). School A in this paper got that possibility because its huge number of children with non-Swedish background and very low school result. This dialogue school project seems to have been supplied in different ways, but the important thing is that it has been official supported. Since school A and school B was in dialogue with each other and cooperation between teachers has existed since 1999, the two headmasters decided that the two schools should formally and officially be dialogue schools. The cooperation between the two schools remains after 2008, when the dialogue project ended, and is still going on.

2.3 Aims for this dialogue schoolwork

The heads and teachers, from both schools, locally set up the aims.

The aims were to promote integration, provide a better understanding between children / young people living in the same city and combat prejudice in adults and children / adolescents. The intention was also to increase the school result by promoting language development. The aims should be achieved through meetings between teachers and pupils from both schools. After 2008 the aims and cooperation remains.

The activities are planned on joint teacher meetings at least twice a semester, for example to have mutual lessons, thematic work, sport activities, collaboration practice. The activities take place four to five times pro semester and sometimes often. Teachers from both classes are present during the activities in order to facilitate pupils to feel safe.

Reflections-on-actions

3. Teacher reflections

The dialogue schoolwork is not evaluated. In the following text examples are highlighted from teacher reflections in a research circle.

A research circle contains of dialogue meetings where teachers and a researcher come together to illuminate issues and experiences that teachers formulate. The aim is to develop both professional schoolwork and to contribute to the formulation of new research questions (Persson, 2008). A more detailed presentation and critical review of research circles as method for school improvement and research is not the focus in this paper and therefore not given in this paper, (See Holmstrand and Härnsten, 2003; Reason, 1994; Huberman, 1996). Research Circles are given in cooperation between the City of Malmö and Malmö University.

In this particular research circle, altogether seven teachers from the two dialogue schools participated, school A and school B. All of them cooperated in the project with school classes in school year 4 (children of the age of ten). I was the circle leader. The teachers wanted to reflect-on their mutual actions (Schön, 1983, p. 68) in order to achieve a deeper understanding about what could improve their work, in order to reduce prejudice. The circle lasted one year, twice a month. In the beginning seven teachers participated. After some time only four were left and in the end only three. The remaining three teachers all worked in school B. Teachers from school A did not get the same possibility to participate. It turned out that their children could not cope with supply teachers, and then the teachers could not get time off to prepare and participate in the circle. This was not a problem in school B. This could be seen as a parallel to the overall condition within their schools and districts.

Good as well as bad examples of activities, was reflected on when teachers from both school classes were present in the research circle. Teachers experienced a main problem that pupils from school B were reluctant to interact with pupils from school A. The teachers interpreted activities, out of the pupil's view, as positive when the pupils interacted with each other and when they did not fight with each other. Teachers'

purpose of the activities is to reduce prejudices. They meant when pupils interact, they get to know each other and the prejudices about each other as a group, will reduce.

3.1 Good example

When reflection-on-action the teachers named a type of activity that according to their experience gained interaction between the pupils in a higher sense than other activities. In common for these positive activities was that they were based on artistic subjects and took place outside school in a professional context. One activity as an example will be highlighted in the paper.

A smaller group of children from each class got together in a so-called test-workshop (Swe: *prova-på verkstad*) called Young film factory (Swe: *Unga Filmfabriken*). The task was to produce a News programme. They had to decide the content and to perform in front of a camera. They had access to clothing and wigs. The children interacted and had great fun; all participated, dressed up, created manuscript and were filmed. When they left, each class got their News report on DVD to bring back to their class.

3.2 The good example and the contact hypothesis

Perhaps, the four conditions mentioned by Pettigrew were at hand in this example. This could have been the case if both groups experienced equal status when participating in the activity; it would then have been the starting point to interact on equal conditions. The task was new to all of them. To solve the task they had to interact to reach the goal, to produce a News-programme. They seem to have perceived it as a common task and they all wanted to take part. In this task, they all could take part on perhaps equal conditions and bring in News that each of them felt important. When filming, they could choose to dress up and perform in new identities. According to the teachers, all of them did that and they had great fun and laughed. Out of cognitive and emotional aspects, it seems to have been an interesting activity to take part in. Artistic subjects make it possible to communicate in different ways and to use your imagination. According to the Contact hypothesis, if prejudices shall decrease, the children must learn more about each other to counteract the stereotyping and perhaps, this type of activity opens up for this. According to Pettigrew, it is of importance that the children were recognised by each other as representatives of each group / category. If this was the case, I do not know. The experience the children have had in this activity could be worked on in following activities with the children. If this small group of children would continue to work together in other activities, according to the Contact hypothesis, it could lead to friendship relations. One of these following-up activities could be a pen pal. Making friends with members of a stereotyped category is necessary. It is a long-term work and if effects should be reduced prejudice it must be generalised to situations outside teacher planned activities, according to Pettigrew.

3.3 No-good examples

Out of their experiences, teachers reflected on two activities that did not work at all. One activity was pen pal and the other was an open-air activity.

The children did not know each other but should be pen pals, write to each other, learn more about each other, see each other as individuals and in this way get a better understanding for each other. According to the teachers it failed its purpose, mostly because it was hard to handle. Some children were ill when they should write letters, some forgot to write, the classes did not consist of equal numbers of children, it took too long until they got answers, some children did not want to take part at all. This was mainly administrative reason. The main reason not to continue with the pen-pal activity was however, according to the teachers, that it rather stressed the differences e.g. the children in school A had problems to use the Swedish language. It increased prejudice by the children in school B and did not gain the experience that a child from school A could be a friend.

The other activity that did not work at all was an open-air activity (*Swe: friluftsdag*) that was not well planned. A large number of pupils participated (four classes from each school, about 160 pupils). They were supposed to interact in a positive way but instead they stuck to themselves, hostilities and fights occurred.

3.4 The no-good examples and the contact hypothesis

From teachers perspective activities were positive when they experienced that they were in control, the meetings were well planned, carried out as planned and the activities were carried out in small groups of pupils. What teachers talked about can be interpreted as a traditional teachers' perception of what is counted as successful activities. However, it is an overly simplistic interpretation. The structure and content that the teachers felt had not worked positively, given as no-good example, they have abandoned and the main reason was that teachers felt that it rather reinforced stereotyping.

Only one condition of the five stated by Pettigrew, seems to have been at hand - the pen pal activity and open-air activity were official supported as a school activity. It should be important to reflect on and to investigate how the pupils perceived the activities, f. inst. why they should interact in the pen pal activity. If the pupils in school B thought that the purpose of exchanging letters was to help pupils in school A to increase their knowledge in the Swedish language, it will probably influence the overlapping processes of equal status, building relationship and interaction in a negative way. They may have perceived that they participated in a normalisation project rather as additional teachers than as pen pals, who should get to know each other, learn more about each other and be friends. Pupils from school A may instead have been perceived as objects, and not as subjects. One of the intentions in the dialogue school project was to increase the school result by promoting language development. It points directly on school A that has low achievement rates and that the school was in the Language programme. However, developing language knowledge is not only a matter of writing but communication in daily life. Pen pal activities, in this context, did not support the aim to fight prejudice and stereotypic thinking at all, on the contrary according to the contact hypothesis. Neither did the open-air activity. It was not carefully considered and

planned. The teacher said they have had in mind that one part of the day should obtain planned sport activities and the rest of the day the children should have the opportunity to interact in their own way. It did not support cooperation instead competition in sport activities. In the afternoon no common task to solve that incurred cooperation between the schools were organised.

4. Short subjective comment

Is dialogue schoolwork as CCW, a method to fight prejudice and gain citizenship? This paper cannot give an answer to that question. My intension has been to highlight and discuss some activities carried out and reflected-on-action by some very serious teachers, involved in this dialogue schoolwork. Their work may well have a potential to fight prejudice, but could also be a risky contra-productive business! Important is to relate dialogue schoolwork as CCW to a theoretical base or at least to a theoretical framework. Is the Contact hypothesis to be considered as a meaningful theoretical base? Yes I think so, but it need to be further discussed and in a more academic and critical way, as in this short paper.

According to Pettigrew, actions and contact between groups in conflicts can lead to opposite reactions and increase prejudice and stereotypic thinking, in spite of good intentions from community workers / teachers. This is also my opinion or fear. It is necessary that the work is well planned if not the opposite, increased prejudice, shall occur. If it links to the Contact hypothesis or even, if it is linked to another theory, it is essential that dialogue schoolwork is seen as long-term processes that need well planned theory-based work, and shall not be carried out as isolated activities in short time programmes.

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