

Newly arrived students in Sweden

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Sweden as a country of immigration



- 9,8 million inhabitants, about 17% foreign-born
- The biggest immigrant groups are from Finland, Iraq, Syria, Serbia/Kosovo, Poland, Iran, Bosnia, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Turkey, Somalia, Afghanistan, Chile,
- Around 23 percent of all children in Sweden under the age of 18 are foreign-born or with foreign-born parents.
- There are 146 language groups in Swedish schools entitled to mother tongue teaching (1-2 hours per week)
- During the last five years asylum-seekers have mainly come from Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea (in total 163 000 in 2015, 71 000 children).
- Sweden receives the highest number of unaccompanied minors in EU (around 35 000 in 2015). The majority of unaccompanied minors are from Afghanistan (around 23 000), Syria, Iraq and Somalia.

Legal responses



- A student is considered as newly arrived up to four years after enrolling in a school in Sweden.
- General legal situation:
 - a) Undocumented and asylum-seeking children have right to attend educational system at all levels (pre-school, elementary and upper secondary levels),
 - b) Same rights and obligations as other students
 - c) However, the elementary level (age 7-15) is not compulsory for asylum-seekers and undocumented.
- Asylum-seeking children have to be offered to enrol a school (elementary or upper secondary according to their age) within a month after their arrival to Sweden.
- Local municipalities (social services) are generally responsible for unaccompanied minors (social care, education, housing, legal guardian).

Organizational responses



- General organizational models for newly arrived at elementary level (age 7-15):
 - a) Separate classes (SC), partially, no more than two years
 - b) Direct immersion in regular (mainstream) classes
 - c) Educational reception centers + SC + Regular classes
 - d) Special schools for newly arrived students
 - e) Organized bussing
 - f) Countless combinations of these models (i.e. bilingual classrooms)
- General organizational model for newly arrived at upper (non-compulsory) secondary level (age 16-19) consists of Language introduction, a specially designed program for newly arrived students with focus on Swedish as a second language.

Pedagogical responses



- Receiving school is required (after a new law was enacted in 2016) to conduct mapping of students' previous knowledge within two months after student's arrival to school, in order to get information about the students' educational needs and background.
- Newly arrived are entitled to support in their own language, often one to two hours per week.
- Newly arrived are entitled to mother tongue teaching.
- Teaching hours can be redirected from other subjects to Swedish as a second language during one year.
- Some governmental initiatives: more resources to support municipalities and schools, more hours in Swedish as a second language, summer schools, professional development of teachers, information dissemination, professional assistance etc.

Some distinguishing features after recent changes



- Clear responsibility on school principals
- Individual student's educational needs and learning in focus
- Clear efforts to separate newly arrived from legislation for students with special needs such as disability, behavioral problems and learning difficulties
- Clear efforts not to physically separate newly arrived from social and pedagogical mainstream

Some major obstacles



- Inadequate implementation.
- Inadequate supporting structures (resources, whole school approach, collaboration).
- Lack of certain teacher categories and properly educated teachers.
- Lack of space caused by sudden arrival of large numbers of refugee students. Uneven allocation of newly arrived among municipalities and schools.
- Lack of scientifically grounded research results that can inform practice and decision making.

Some results from the research project *Newly arrived students and learning* (Bunar, Axelsson, Nilsson Folke, Hertzberg, Bouakaz 2015)



- Neither separate classes nor direct immersion is a panacea for inclusion of newly arrived students in school's social and pedagogical contexts.
- Focus on content, individual needs, high level of cognitive challenge combined with high level of support, evaluation of the progress, flexibility in the system.
- Welcoming climate, countering stigmatization and efforts aiming at social inclusion.
- A critical moment for newly arrived concerning both social and pedagogical matters is transition from separate to ordinary class.
- Communication and cooperation between major stakeholders, specially between different teacher categories (SSL, subject, mother tongue and language support teachers)
- Poor cooperation with parents and local community

Newly arrived students attitudes to education



- Want to be "normal", "just like everybody else", "attend a real class, study all subjects and earn grades"
- Importance of learning Swedish as quickly as possible
- Plenty of ambition
- In need of help and support, pedagogical as well as social
- Need encouragement and feeling/signs that they are moving forward in the system, that they are developing
- See clear chances in the Swedish education system
- Underline the need of getting accustomed to the codes of conduct (whatever they might be) in school's everyday practices.

The parents' perspective



- The refugee parents' experience of school has to be considered and assessed within a broader framework of municipal reception and social status. Welcoming climate, respectful treatment and proper housing are the most important aspects. Granted asylum, language learning opportunities of high quality and employment/meaningful internship are additional crucial aspects.
- Housing segregation is one of the major elements exerting negative impacts on newly arrived refugee students' educational opportunities.
- Parents did not have any particular reflections on schools' organizational models (separate or mainstream classes) or pedagogy.
- They do not seek active involvement in schools' everyday practices. Rather, they seek information (a short weekly notice), respectful treatment and ongoing communication, that make them feel included in children's schooling.
- Majority of parents in our sample expressed criticism towards teachers' attitude; they felt belittled and even humiliated and their competence as parents were repeatedly called into question.
- Teachers interviewed in the project confirmed difficulties in cooperation with parents, but the root cause, according to them, was cultural differences.
- All parents had high educational aspirations, but their ability to support children is rather limited. Consequently we need to find tools to support parents, because this is the way to support children's learning and development.

My final message: Against identity, organizational, pedagogical and relational reductionism



- See and confirm an individual/a child and not social constructions such as newly arrived, unaccompanied, refugee, Somali, Afghan, Iraqi. Thereby I don't suggest the children's social and cultural competences should be neglected, but they should be seen as defining aspects (among many others) of an individual. Not as a definition of an individual.
- Recognize and deal with children's difficulties in schools as a consequence of their shortcomings in certain school subjects. Do not reduce their entire life world with reference to these shortcomings.
- Affirm the values of multilingualism and multicultural relations and networks for all students at one school. Do not reduce meeting places to give newly arrived students "a dose of Swedishness".