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Educating the old and newcomers: Perspectives of teachers on teaching in multicultural schools in Sweden

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This study focuses on teachers in schools with large numbers of new arrival immigrant pupils in a provincial school district in mid-Sweden. Drawing from focus group interviews and examples from the teachers’ lessons, we examined the views of the teachers regarding the challenges experienced in responding to the pedagogical needs of new arrival pupils in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous classrooms. The findings reveal the structural and organisational problems at the city council and at the school and classroom levels as the major challenges. These include the pressure to create inclusive and safe classrooms for diverse cultural and linguistic pupils in an atmosphere where there is limited resources and emphasis on standardised assessment and teaching for tests within a prescribed curriculum. However, the teachers’ pedagogical practices demonstrate attempts at intercultural teaching that build on the pupils cultural and linguistic experiences and compares well with principles of cultural responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: newcomer; immigrant pupils; intercultural education; multicultural school

Introduction

Sweden, like a number of European countries is currently receiving a number of refugees and immigrants, primarily from troubled countries such as Somali, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Skolinspektionen, 2013). Today approximately 20% of the nation’s 9.5 million inhabitants were either born abroad or are the children of two parents born abroad. Among these groups are the recent arrivals or new-comes a term used in the educational policy documents to refer to a student who has migrated for any reason, for example, as a refugee, for family reunion, or labour migration and who does not possess basic knowledge of Swedish language and who starts school just prior to or during the regular academic year with no basic knowledge of the Swedish language (Utbildningsdepartment, Ds: 2013;6).

The education situation of new arrivals in provincial town and municipalities outside the big cities, like Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmo is scarce. (Nilsson & Bunar, 2015; Skolverket, 2010) Studies on education of immigrant children generally tend to focus on the situation in these big cities and on school districts and municipalities that historically catered for immigrants. However, in the wake of the current increasing migration of refugees and asylum seekers, the provincial schools that have in the past catered for relatively “homogeneous” Swedish children or immigrants old-comers with longstanding experience of schools in Sweden are currently receiving large numbers of refugees and new arrivals. For example, the municipal Council of mid-Sweden where this study was conducted report

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9.8% of their 10,000 student population are foreign born and most of them are new arrivals (SCB, 2014).

As a result of their forced and typically abrupt departure from their homeland, the new arrivals face difficulties in their adjustment to state schools in Sweden because of interrupted experience with school (Skolinspektionen, 2013; Skowronske, 2013), and their post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Nilsson & Bunar, 2015). Learning the Swedish language is also often another significant barrier to success that new arrival face in school (Gröning, 2006; Otterup, 2004). Similarly, cultural differences and the relationship with the parents have been highlighted as a problem for Swedish teachers’ schools (Bouakaz, 2007; Lahdenperä, 1998; Nilsson, 2008; Obondo, 2005b). Thus, there is need for research that focus on these schools and on the pedagogical practices of teachers facing this new phenomenon. In addition, most of the studies conducted in the big cities tend to focus on structural and organisational problems rather than on educators’ practices or content of the curriculum (see Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Wiggs, 2008 for exception). To address this important and yet under-examined area of educational research, this article focuses on teachers in schools with large numbers of children from immigrant background and classrooms with newcomers in a provincial school district in mid-Sweden. The overall goal of this study is to explore the responses and competencies these teachers perceived were important in their pedagogical work with their pupils in schools with linguistic and cultural diversities in the face of the institutional obstacles and challenges faced. More specifically, the study aimed at highlighting the complexities of the work charged to these teachers including the ambivalences experienced as they sought to help these pupils become successful learners in unfamiliar school system. The following three guiding questions were posed at the start of the study:

(a) Which are the major challenges facing teachers working in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts in these schools?

(b) What are the competencies teachers perceive as necessary working with new arrival students?

(c) What pedagogical practices do the teachers perceive as positive attributes working in culturally and linguistically diverse schools and classrooms?

This article begins in the next section by providing the theoretical perspectives underpinning the study and then give an overview of the educational context and research responses on situation of education of immigrant minorities in Sweden and also from international context. The article then describes the context of the study, the methodology, and the findings of the study.

Theoretical perspectives from multicultural and intercultural education

The theoretical framework guiding the research questions is drawn from literature on multicultural and intercultural education (see e.g. Banks & McGee Banks, 2007; Gundara, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lahdenperä, 2006; Lorentz, 2007; Nieto, 1999; Portera, 2014). Both multicultural and intercultural education has been used interchangeably by some scholars to refer to teaching approaches and research in culturally diverse classrooms.

In this study, we prefer to use the term intercultural education to denote the importance of interaction of cultures and practices where teachers affirm differences and identities of their pupils and communities (Banks & McGee Banks, 2007; Gundara, 2000; Portera,
As these scholars have observed, the meanings attached to intercultural education vary, but intercultural education is generally closely linked to visions of equity, ethnic, and cultural identity, the multicultural society and the opinions of the role of the schools in this. This study takes a practice-informed perspective on intercultural education drawing from contextual knowledge of teachers and researchers at the classroom level (e.g. Igoa, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Rodell Olgac, 1999; Sleeter, 2013). Aspects of intercultural education that we explored include teachers’ personal qualities or competencies when it comes to managing their work in multicultural classrooms.

A survey of literature on intercultural education (see e.g. Lahdenperä, 2000; Perry & Southwell, 2011) identifies a number of competencies for teachers in multicultural classrooms that include: (a) Cognitive aspects – awareness of the cultural differences in the meanings and interpretation including teachers reflecting on their own and the children’s cultures while at the same time avoiding essentialism. (b) Affective competence – personal skills, attitudes, and positive attitudes towards other cultures are also necessary, such as empathy, curiosity, and respect. (c) Pedagogical competence – intentions, behaviour, and pedagogical actions, meaning that the teachers can work with multicultural/intercultural activities with children and parents and improve and develop the quality of multicultural teaching. The pedagogical aspect also includes establishing positive, stable, and trustful social relations and to cooperate with parents and to form open and inclusive classroom environment (Nieto, 1999).

Immigration and composition of migrants in Sweden: an overview

Migration to Sweden is a relatively new phenomenon. Following the end of Second World War immigration to Sweden increased steadily. Europe was in ruins and in neutral Sweden industry was thriving and a large labour force was needed to work in these industries (Nilsson, 2004). Workers were recruited from Italy, Hungary, Austria, and Greece as well as from Germany and Belgium. According to Samuelsson, workers also arrived from the other Scandinavian countries and in particular from Finland, especially after the 1954 when Scandinavia became a common labour. During the 1960s and 1970s new groups of labour migrants arrived, especially from Former Yugoslavia, Greece, Finland, and Turkey. The work migration resulted in a considerable increase of foreign people from 198,000 in 1950s to 538,000 in 1970 (Nilsson, 2004). However, immigration rules changed during the 1970s following the economic downturn of the 1960s. From the mid-1970s, a period of regulated labour immigration was introduced resulting in a reduction of immigrants from countries outside Europe.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an increase in immigration again with the majority of migrants being political refugees. These groups included refugees from Chile, and Turkey, Iran, Lebanon as well as Syria (Nilsson, 2004). Political refugees also came from former Yugoslavia and from conflict regions in Africa, for example, Somalia and Eritrea. This migration resulted in a significant number of foreign people, about 20,000 new migrants arrived to Sweden every year during the period 1985–2000 (Nilsson, 2004). However, immigration rules changed during the 1970s following the economic downturn of the 1960s. From the mid-1970s, a period of regulated labour immigration was introduced resulting in a reduction of immigrants from countries outside Europe.

Migrant children is a heterogeneous group with varying experiences such as social and educational background, family relations, reasons for migration, experiences of war, and persecution (for example, children from Syria, Iraq, and Somalia) and the formal
positioning based on the legal status, such as, whether they are undocumented children, asylum-seeking children, children granted refugee status, or children of immigrant workers who come from both inside and outside the European Union (www.migrationsverket.se). Following the legal change that came in effect in 2013 (Skolinspektionen, 2013), all these categories of children are allowed to attend school at all levels – preschool, elementary school, and upper secondary – in same schools and conditions as native Swedish children. Accommodating the needs of these varied groups of children poses challenges on education policy and school practice. Below is a brief overview of education context, some policy, and research responses that sets the background for the study presented in this article.

**Swedish educational context, policy, and research responses on immigrant education**

The Swedish school system comprises compulsory school and non-compulsory schooling. Sweden has nine years of compulsory schooling between the ages 7 and 16. Non-compulsory schooling include preschools and after school care, the regular upper secondary school and upper secondary schools for children with special needs, municipal adult education, and adult education for the mentally challenged. In the 1990s, Swedish education system changed from a centralised to a decentralised system. In 1991, the responsibility for compulsory and upper secondary school was transferred to the municipalities. Thus, the municipalities and the county council authorities are responsible for organising and financing education below university level (Education Act, SFS 2010:800). Similar to the other students, the responsibility of organising classes for newcomers and teaching immigrant children is left to the municipalities, schools, and the responsible teachers to decide on as they deem appropriate and possible (Skolverket, 2012).

The educational programmes offered by municipalities for new arrival immigrant children often fall under two main types: transitional classes sometimes called introductory or international classes and the direct immersion or known as mainstreaming. The transitional classes are preparatory classes and the goals are to introduce newcomers to the Swedish school and to prepare the pupils for subject matter instruction (Skolverket, 2014). Teachers in preparatory classes are often specialists in Swedish as a second language and the curriculum is typically focused on Swedish language, Mathematics, and English. The support of mother tongue teacher is sometimes enlisted to facilitate communication (Nilsson & Bunar, 2015). The fact that pupils in the transitional classes have little contact with Swedish pupils, and that they are themselves very heterogeneous, have been identified as problematic by a number of scholars and practising teachers (Skowronski, 2013). Experiences of isolation and exclusion create resentment towards transitional classes often described as “a school existing within a school” (see results section below). The other common model is the direct immersion sometimes called mainstreaming (Skowronski, 2013). In some municipalities, all newcomers are placed in directly in mainstream classes, with or without support of a mother tongue or a Swedish as a second language teacher. The advocates of mainstreaming describe it as beneficial both for social and pedagogical reasons, i.e. programmes are inclusive and students are “immersed” in Swedish language right from the beginning.

Under Education Act, (Education Act, SFS 2010:800; Skollagen, 2010), Swedish comprehensive schools are to ensure that all pupils, regardless of their linguistic and cultural background, gender, place of birth, and socio-economic receive equal access to education and that the quality of education should be the same for all pupils (Government paper, 1996/97). Notwithstanding this egalitarian ambition, recent surveys conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2012) show that the overall performance of children of immigrant background is much lower than children with native born
parents in all measures of academic success. The surveys also illuminate a number of problems; some relate to the Swedish language, while others relate to the deficiencies in school organisation and teaching situation, especially as regards the newcomers who do not seem to get the support necessary for integration in the new school system (Skolinspektionen, 2013). The surveys also bring to light the fact that finances and structural barriers seem to be the deciding factors in teaching the pupils rather than the educational considerations (OECD, 2010; Skolinspektionen, 2013; Skolverket, 2012).

The research response to the education situation of children of immigrants in Swedish schools is varied and extensive. However, studies that have explored the extent to which the schools respond to immigrants (e.g. Frilund, 2011; Lahdenperä, 2015; Parszyk, 1999; Runfors, 2003; Skowronska, 2013) highlight a number of problems relating to teachers and how the schools define and categorise immigrant pupils. Relatively few of the teachers studied showed an altogether positive attitude towards the pupils. According to these scholars, the categorisations are reproduced in the everyday practices of teachers. Frilund notes, for example, that while “Swedish pupils” are defined by their social class, the children of immigrants are almost exclusively defined by their ethnicity. There is a parallel educational structure in the schools, or a “we” and “them” school existing side by side. These studies reflect by and large, the challenges facing many European and American educational systems and the OECD that are dysfunctional for disproportionately large numbers of children who are not part of the cultural and linguistic mainstream (Cummins, 1996; 2000; Nieto, 1999; OECD, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 1995–2008; Nusche, 2009; Obondo, 2011). While as Cochran-Smith underscores, there are no universal strategies for teaching children who are culturally and linguistically different from the “majority” students, there is already substantial evidence from research reporting practices and perspectives that contribute to the improvement of educational and academic results for refugees, immigrants, and second language students.

In the section that follows, we highlight some studies conducted in different international contexts that provide some evidence into possibilities for improving education of immigrant minorities in a second language learning context and that set the context for this study.

Studies on effective education for immigrants and second language learners

In reviewing examples effective instruction for culturally diverse students, Cummins (1996) note that success is likely to be achieved where the following issues are addressed:

- affirmation of student’s cultural identity and encouragement of first language (L1) literacy and language development.
- involving families and community in the education of their children and encouragement of active parental participation.
- cognitively challenging instruction and critical literacy.
- Tests and evaluation.

The first element two elements, that is, the affirmation of students’ cultural identity and encouragement of the use of first language (L1) as well as involving parents and community in the education of their children have been explored by many scholars (e.g. Ada, 1988; Cummins, 1996, 2000; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Obondo, 2005a). The results from the studies conclusively suggest that for immigrant minority students, the extent to which students language and culture is incorporated into the school programmes constitute a
significant prediction of academic success (e.g. Cummins, 1996; Lucas & Katz, 1994). Success reflect both the solid cognitive/academic foundation developed through first language (L1) and the reinforcement of the students’ cultural identity. The success does not depend on teaching the mother tongue or the primary language of the child but even possible in a “monolingual” second language dominant classroom context. Lucas and Katz (1994) examples of exemplary Special Alternative Instructional Programs from the US (operating in six states) show how the schools make considerable use of the student’s primary language in monolingual English only contexts.

Among the concrete ways Lucas and Katz (1994) suggest teachers drew on the linguistic resources were, for example, providing activities that specifically called for students to use their L1 with each other. For example, less fluent students were paired with more fluent from the same L1 background so that the more fluent students could assist those who were less fluent to comprehend instruction and develop L1 literacy skills. Lucas and Katz conclusion is that “the classrooms were multilingual environments in which students native languages served a multitude of purposes and functions gave them access to academic content, to classroom activities and to their knowledge and experiences” (1994: p. 545; see also Garcia, 1991). They suggest that students’ cultural identities are likely to be validated in instructional programmes that attempt to add a second language to the primary language the students bring to school rather than replace it.

Similarly, studies on parental participation of linguistic diverse students and involving their community in the education of their children show that academic and linguistic growth of students is significantly increased when parents see themselves and are seen by the schools as co-educators of their children along with the school (Ada, 1988; Bouakaz, 2007; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982). Researchers show that even simple initiatives that permit parents to participate actively in aspects of their children education can have profound effect.

Tizard et al. (1982) report an ethnographic study carried out in an inner city area of London, England where major improvements in children’s reading occurred by teachers simply sending books home on a daily basis with the children to read for their parents. The participating parents spoke little English and they were illiterate in both English and L1 (Bengali and Greek). Since the parents had limited knowledge of English, the students would likely have translated or paraphrased the story for their parents in their L1. This constitutes academically demanding activity that may have increased students ability to analyse the semantic and syntactic aspects of the text (Cummins, 1996). The positive impact of parental involvement and support is documented in a number of other studies (Ada, 1988).

The conclusion drawn from the results from a number of studies is that, “when educators and parents develop partnership to promote their children’s education, parents appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to children with positive academic consequences” (Cummins, 1996: p. 152).

Finally, there are considerable number of documented accounts addressing the third and fourth elements above, that is, tests and evaluation of second language learners and accelerating critical literacy. A number of studies highlight how second language learner students’ academic progress improved as a result of particular kinds of pedagogical approaches and practices (e.g. Cummins, 1996; Hammond, 2009). These studies suggest that students’ academic progress can be accelerated significantly under optimal conditions. Hammond (2009) presents a study of an intensive English transition program for English as second learners in Sydney, Australia. The study conducted together with teachers and other educators is based on Vygotsky’s notion of Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) built on the metaphor of “scaffolding”. The project activities involved teachers
identifying pedagogical strategies that provide high levels of targeted support for ESL students in their engagement with academic content (Hammond, 2009). Hammond argues that, teachers unfamiliar with instructional strategies for second language learners tend to engage students in tasks that are minimal in scope and undemanding. This permits students to work within their present level of second language (English for this matter) but never pushes them to go beyond that level, which they must do if they are to catch up academically to L1 students (see also Cummins, 1996; Gibson, 2009).

In conclusion, the literature reviewed here suggest possible ways to effective instruction for minority students, practices that empower students by affirming their identities and by creating learning environment that is challenging academically and yet welcoming for all students. Within this conception, standardised tests are but one genre of language whose conventions students should be familiar with if their academic work is to be recognised, As Cummins (1996) notes, teachers must work to demystify the language of tests if culturally diverse students were to succeed.

The context of the study, municipality, and the participants

This study was conducted in a town with long history of receiving migrants, beginning in the 1950s with labour migrants from Finland and other Nordic countries, and later in 1970s with refugees from Southern and Central European countries. The current immigrant groups coming to the town district are primarily from Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and other non-European countries. The pupil populations in the school district studied comprise newcomers who had just arrived in the country, the children whose parents or grandparents came to Sweden at separate times and the Swedish children. The statistics from the municipal council show that 25% of the pupils has a foreign background and about 27% in secondary level are foreign born (SCB [statistics Sweden] (2010) [The Swedish National Agency for Education. Stockholm]).

The town district has 26 schools with classes’ ranging from preparatory to grade 9. In some schools, it is possible to find up to 80–90% of pupils being of foreign background. Classrooms with newcomers who just arrived in the country and children whose parents or grandparents came to Sweden several decades back are very common in the studied school district (SCB [statistics Sweden] (2010) [The Swedish National Agency for Education. Stockholm]). The municipal council department (intercultural section) is responsible for receiving newcomers, assessing their knowledge base in different subjects and recommending replacements. The predominant model for newcomers is transitional with a landing period where newcomers spend between 4 and 10 weeks in a receiving location before being relocated to transitional classes in the assigned schools.

This study grew out of the initiative of the then head of the intercultural section (the third author) who contacted teachers in the local schools interested in participating in a study – circle to discuss the educational needs of cultural and linguistic diverse groups of pupils in the municipal schools. She took contact with head teachers and sent letters of invitation to all schools asking for volunteers to participate in the project. The initial responses came from 20 teachers who answered the letters and showed interest in the project. However, only 11 teachers reported to the meetings she scheduled to initiate the project. The teachers (all women) primarily from schools with reception classes for newcomers’ participated in the study circle and the subsequent focus group interviews. Thus, it should be noted on the onset, that the research was originally not designed to target newcomer teachers or women teachers. The participants’ interest in the project and on teaching cultural diverse students steered the study’s choice of participants. The fact that they were
all women teachers reflect the gender composition of the teaching profession in Sweden (and elsewhere) that has become increasingly a woman dominated profession (Skolverket, 2012).

As Table 1 below shows, the teachers work experience in the multicultural schools varied from one year to 30 years. Seven of the participants worked in newcomer or International/Preparatory classes (IN) and the rest were worked in regular or mainstream classrooms with Swedish native speakers, pupils with Swedish as a second language, and newcomers with limited Swedish and subject content competence. The teachers also report varied and long experience in multicultural contexts, as preschool teachers, subject teachers, and special education and after school teachers. Apart from two participants (Kappa and Jota), all the other teachers also reported having Swedish as a second language as an additional qualification over and above their teacher certificates. As a matter of policy; Swedish school districts do not keep count of ethnic backgrounds of students and teachers, therefore, we cannot provide the ethnic (Swedish) distribution of the teachers.

Methodology and procedures in the study
This is a qualitative study with focus group interviews and textual analysis of teachers’ lessons. The qualitative approach enabled us to explore the lived experiences of the participants and the assumptions underlying their practices (Atkinson, Delamont, & Hammersley, 1988; Hansson, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Silverman, 2005). The study was conducted in two phases: the first phase comprised the study circle group meetings and the activities that included reading selected literature, and reflections of critical incidences or occurrences in the participants’ own classrooms. The group met 10 times between January 2011 and April 2012. Data were collected in the form of critical incidents, a method typically used for collecting data based on recollections from previous observations rather than real-time events (Hansson, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 2004). While the critical incident method has been criticised for limited generality and bias (Hansson, 1995), we found it useful in providing real world experiences of the teachers, their intentions and reflections on classroom practices as well as lessons they perceived as “successful” in culturally diverse classrooms.

We defined a “successful” lesson operationally following Gay (2010) as the extent to which the lessons build on the personal and cultural strengths of the pupils, their intellectual [linguistic] capabilities, their prior knowledge, and experience, i.e. using what the pupils know as a resource to teach new academic knowledge. In all 24 critical incidents or lesson examples were presented in written form. The analysis involved reading all the cases and then categorising the extent to which the lessons conformed to our operational definition of “successful” as defined above It is worth noting here that a number of the examples (12 lessons) were lessons that we considered could pass for any class and not necessarily for a culturally and linguistically diverse group. This was in itself an interesting observation considering the ethnic and linguistic diversity population of the municipal schools as the statistics noted above reflect.

The second phase of the study involved focus group interviews in two groups of five and six persons, respectively. The 11 participants were the same teachers who participated in the study circle. The interviews took approximately 1 hour 30 min for each group and the responses were recorded and transcribed. Prior consent from the teachers to tape-record the sessions was obtained by the third author, whose role changed from being a participant in the study circle to being a researcher/moderator during the second phase. The transcribed interviews were categorised into themes and sub-themes to respond to the three guiding questions above. Consideration was given throughout the study process and procedures.
utilised for each phase to ensure institutional that ethical requirements were met and that
the research followed the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council (Swedish
Research Council, 2011). All data have been treated confidentially and no participant or
institution can be identified in the material.

Findings and themes

The teachers interviewed have long and varied years of experience working in multicultural
schools, and their practices and views on teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse
environments are equally diverse. The findings are based on the focus group interviews
and the critical incidences or examples from the teachers’ classroom practices. The third
author did the initial categorisation of the raw data and we (the first and second authors)

Table 1. The Interviewed teachers in focus groups 1 and 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group 1</th>
<th>Grade levels</th>
<th>Children’s languages in class</th>
<th>Subject field and teaching experiences in international class (IN)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfa</td>
<td>4–6 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Somali</td>
<td>Swedish as a second Language, 8 years and 7 years (IN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>6–9 grades</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Swedish as a second Language/social studies, 9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamma</td>
<td>Pre-school and grades 1–3</td>
<td>Somali, Arabic, Thai, Urdu</td>
<td>Swedish as a second language, 30 years in (IN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>4–6 grades</td>
<td>Kurdish, Arabic, Syrian, Somali, Finnish, Swedish, Chinese, Vietnamese</td>
<td>Swedish as a second language/social studies, (14 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeta</td>
<td>Pre-school 1–5 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Somali</td>
<td>Social studies, Science, Maths, Swedish, English and study guide, 20 years in preschool and 3 years in (IN)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group 2</th>
<th>Grade levels</th>
<th>Children’s languages in class</th>
<th>Subject field and teaching experiences in international class (IN)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eta</td>
<td>1–6 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Kaldian, Albanian, Kurdish</td>
<td>Preschool education, Swedish as a second language, special education 23 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theta</td>
<td>1–3 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Kurdish, Farsi</td>
<td>Swedish for immigrants, Swedish, 30 years, 10 years (IN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jota</td>
<td>6–9 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Tigrinya Thai, Somali, Vietnamese</td>
<td>Subject teacher, 7 years, 4 years (IN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa</td>
<td>Preschool 1–5 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, Farsi, Russian</td>
<td>Preschool teacher and class teacher, 8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My</td>
<td>1–3 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Somali, Chaldean, Sorani</td>
<td>Swedish as a second language, mathematics, study director, swedish for immigrants, (SFI) 14 years, 13 years (IN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambda</td>
<td>Study Counsel- lor 1–9 grades</td>
<td>Arabic, Polish, Thai Somali</td>
<td>Swedish as a second language, study counsellor, 13 years (IN)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: IN refers to introduction classes for newcomers. We use the Greek alphabet instead of the participants’ real names for anonymity and to preserve the teachers’ integrity.
have re-analysed them into three broad themes corresponding to the research questions and identified the emerging patterns presented under the headings below.

**Cultural and linguistic diverse classrooms – positive and negative challenges**

The inherent challenges facing teachers of children who are culturally and linguistically different are well documented in the research literature. In the analysis of the data for this study, however, we focused mainly on the challenges, facing teachers of newcomers in the introductory or international classes. The teachers described the international classes as a place where the newly arrived pupils spend a short time to enable themselves to acquire some basic knowledge of the Swedish language, receive an introduction to Swedish “culture” and get acclimatised to the school itself before moving to the mainstream classes.

As Table 1 above shows, 7 out of 11 teachers who participated in the focus interviews worked mainly in these reception or introductory classes. The school population includes large groups of newcomers from Somalia, Syria, and Kurdistan, but also smaller groups from Poland, former Yugoslavia, and Albania as well as from far away countries, such as China and Vietnam. Some of the teachers report having the newcomers, Somali and Syrians, “old comers”, the Finnish and Romani and Swedish speakers as well as small language groups, such as Urdu, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Farsi speakers in the same class. The teachers describe the school population as fluid and shifting with “constant arrival of new pupils demanding the building of new groups and re-organisation of the existing ones”.

In answer to the question of how they respond to the diverse groups in their classrooms, the teachers were contradictory in their responses. On the one hand, diversity is associated with difficulties and social problems, and on the other, it is deemed positive and the different nationalities are described as “representing the world” and teaching them as “fun and exciting work learning new things all the time”. The teachers described their classrooms as a place to negotiate differences and tolerance and one teacher describes her role as a “protector” of the rights of the immigrant children, “sharp elbows” to defend pupils in the class by staying on top of things so that the class is not neglected, defending the rights of children in international classes (reception classes) so that they are not neglected (referring to the physical isolation of these classes). The teachers spoke proudly about the pupils as being knowledgeable about religion in comparison with their Swedish classmates and the parents described as “grateful parents” who appreciate the work the teachers are doing.

In contrast to the views above, the teachers also expressed both frustration and disappointment in the organisation of reception classes and the teaching of newcomers; for example, only a few schools bear the burden and responsibility of immigrant children, resulting in concentration of certain language groups in the same school. The teachers also spoke about the deficiency in the quality of materials and the fact that the school district seems to prioritise new technologies or, as one teacher put it, the school administrators “saying hallelujah to IT and entrepreneurship”. There was also concern about the physical isolation of the international classes described by one of the teachers as a “wide gap” existing between the international classes and the ordinary or mainstream classes despite the fact that both classes are in one school. The “wide gap” was used symbolically to describe pupils in the international class, as having wide gaps in the subject areas and yet the grading is standard with no consideration taken for either the gaps in the children’s subject knowledge or their competence in academic language. The standard tests, as one teacher explains, fails pupils in international classes “who despite having strived to learn Swedish as much as they also learn the school subjects, fail in the end”. 
The Swedish language and teaching the heterogeneous classes that included newcomers with limited or no Swedish competence was named by all teachers as the major problem faced in international classes. While some teachers spoke positively of linguistic diversity as enabling, a way to learn from one another, an opportunity to experience different perspectives and a means to experience other cultures, the majority of the teachers described linguistic diversity in their classrooms as a hindrance. The problem of language seems to be a key issue in the interviews. Expressions such as “underdeveloped language”, “language difficulties” and “these children have no language” appear frequently in the interviews to describe the children and their learning difficulties.

The teachers had different motives for identifying the language as a problem. One relates to the children and what they lack, and the other to teaching difficulties in linguistically heterogeneous classes. As one teacher explains, it is “difficult for Swedish pupils in a multicultural class to advance in knowledge and receive challenging work at their level”. Teaching in mainstream classes does not seem to be a problem for Swedish teachers and the subject teachers. The teachers named cooperation between Swedish as a second language and subject teachers as a major problem. In the words of one of the teachers, “the subject teachers seem to be carrying on business as usual”, oblivious to the fact that the pupils have not acquired the Swedish language. “These teachers are incompetent to teach pupils from immigrant backgrounds” she notes.

In summary, while the teachers express a number of challenges they encounter in the newcomer, the overriding challenge named by all teachers was how to teach the heterogeneous classes that included newcomers with limited or no basic Swedish competence, different ages, school background, and gaps in the subject knowledge. The views expressed by these teachers underscore the sentiments by the scholars reviewed earlier (Cummins, 2000; Hammond, 2009) on the importance of preparing teachers to meet the challenges in culturally diverse classrooms and employing practices that accelerate the students’ academic competence while being supportive, employing the strategy “high challenge and high support” as Hammond calls it (Hammond, 2009).

**Conceptualising change in pedagogical practices – assimilation and difference**

The teachers had varied perspectives on what they perceived as necessary responses to challenges faced in teaching newcomers. In our analysis, we could identify two divergent perspectives: a deficient and assimilative stance to the pupils’ linguistic and cultural differences; and a positive predisposition stance, advocating difference, change of attitude, and teaching practices in response to cultural and linguistic diversity in the schools. The assimilative views were expressed mainly by those teachers who perceived the Swedish school system as antithetically different from the schools that the newcomers attended previously.

The interviews contain statements such as “learning by rote or reproducing what is in the books”, “not group trained” and “corporal punishment” to represent what the teachers perceive as “typical” of the earlier school experiences or culture of the pupils in contrast to the Swedish children. The pupils were supposed to be “socialised” into these practices or what was described generally as “Swedish norms” explained as “getting them [pupils] to take responsibility for their learning … to take control of their own learning … to use their own words in answers … not to expect a right or wrong answer”. Such statements were used to express what the pupils lack in contrast to the Swedish children who were described as having acquired the norms from preschool. The teachers described themselves often as “we” and as having a different culture from “them” [the pupils] who are different and come from school cultures described as “authoritarian” and practices that were a hindrance.
to adapting to the new school system. The parents were expected to actively participate in this “socialisation” process since as one teacher explains “it’s not just me as a teacher to make sure kids learn but it’s also them [parents]”. In these teachers’ perspectives, the responsibility of adapting to the new school system lies with the children and the parents.

A different perspective held by a number of other teachers was that the schools and the teachers should adapt to the changing cultural and linguistic composition of classrooms. These teachers argued that it was inconceivable to ignore linguistic and cultural diversity as they affect the pedagogical practices. In the words of one of the teachers: “I think it’s really important that we, as teachers in a multicultural class, change the way we teach … you can’t teach in the same way as in the past when everyone has understood all the words pretty much as you said them”. Some teachers called this change “intercultural work” while some refer to it as “integration work”, concepts used to differentiate their approach from the assimilative thinking held by some of the teachers. On the question of what it would entail in practice teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, the teachers gave varied suggestions, ranging from teaching specific subjects to broader questions relating to racism, immigration, and integration in the new society. With respect to classroom practices, the teachers listed a number of practices that they argued were useful in teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. These practices included:

- Working with diversity in class so that pupils can take advantage of one another’s differences and culture.
- Adapting teaching after pupils’ competence and knowledge in Swedish.
- Liaising with parents – not to send homework home that they [pupils] can’t do.
- Doing homework at school with help from language support [mother tongue].
- Assessing pupils based on ability – not on the basis of standard tests.
- Showing empathy to “protect pupils” in the international class by staying on top of things so that the newcomers are not neglected (refers to segregation in the schools). The above suggestions resonate well with recent research on teaching culturally diverse as discussed above. Studies we reviewed show, for example, high levels of pupil engagement when concepts in the curriculum are taught through content and examples drawn from more than one cultural group (e.g. Cummins, 1996; Gibbson, 2009; Igoa, 1995; Lucas & Katz, 1994). Similarly, immigrants and specifically newcomers succeed in learning environments where they feel safe, cared for and respected. The importance of affective skills for teachers in such learning contexts is frequently underestimated and yet previous research has highlighted that teachers’ expectations of pupils’ academic success is greatly impacted by the affective factors, the attitude of teachers, more particularly (Hammond, 2009; Igoa, 1995; Portera, 2014).

**Intentions and pedagogical practices – Dilemmas of teaching beyond cultural essentialism**

Part of the task in the study circle activity was for the participating teachers to document and present lesson examples considered “successful” in a class of pupils from different cultural and linguistic groups. The questions framing the task were: (a) What happened (b) Who was present (c) How did it start? (d) What did the participants do? (e) How did it end? (f) Why is this a good or successful teaching learning situation for children with
diverse cultural backgrounds? In analysing the lessons, we could identify three major categories: Category (1) lessons focused more on pedagogical processes and thus could pass for any class and not necessarily for a culturally and linguistically diverse group. Category (2) lessons drew from the children’s “culture” or traditions as a departure point to teach about the Swedish traditions or subject content. Category (3) were lessons where the teacher build on the pupils’ prior knowledge and current experiences to teach new knowledge and key concepts in the curriculum. In the section below, we analyse excerpts from these categories to examine the assumptions underlying the teachers’ pedagogical practices and dilemma in teaching beyond cultural awareness and essentialism.

**Excerpt 1 Jotas class: is renewable energy common knowledge for all?**

The lesson is in international class 6–7 with 10 pupils and with the Study Counsellor as an extra support staff. The non-Swedish languages represented are Vietnamese, Thailand’s, Somali, Tigrinya, and Arabic Jota explains the beginning of the lesson as follows:

> The topic was renewable energy disadvantages and advantages. The pupils discussed the topic renewable energy in relation to preserving the environment. They identified and classified the different types of energy, for example, wind and fossil energy. I draw from the pupils’ prior knowledge and interest to raise awareness that they had some knowledge to share despite coming from the different corners of the world.

The excerpt from Jotas class exemplify what we considered as Category 1 lessons where the teachers follow the curriculum as given, but do not connect to the children earlier or current lived cultural and linguistic experiences. Instead, the focus is on what one may refer to as “neutral pedagogical practices” such as, grouping pupils correctly; maintaining order without being autocratic and mastering the subject matter lessons. Jotas remarks “... that they had some knowledge to share despite coming from the different corners of the world” reflect a deficient view of the children that resonate with the assimilative views discussed in the interviews and the idealised and underlying assumptions about the pupils knowledge. As we in the reviewed literature, one of the crucial ways in which teachers validate culturally diverse students’ background experiences is to activate their previous experiences (Cochran-Smith, 1995–2008; Nieto, 1999). The excerpt 2 lesson below from Thetas class exemplify another dominant perspective in the explored example lessons.

**Excerpt 2 Theta’s class: do you have forests in Iraq?**

The lesson is in international class in grade 1–3 with nine pupils and the language support teacher (mother tongue). The non-Swedish languages represented in the class were Arabic, Kurdish, and Farsi. Theta describes the beginning of her lesson as follows:

> We spoke about spring and what happens with nature. We discussed about spring in Iraq and Afghanistan. What are the differences and similarities and asked the children whether there are forests in Iraq and [our] home countries. We visited a nearby forest in order to learn, feel the environment, play and observe nature. We spoke of different trees, cones, and forest animals. The discussion was interesting! The main thing was play, discovery and inquiry! We went back to the classroom “with lots of positive energy” and with the consensus that the forest is an exciting place! The children looked forward to another visit.
The example from Theta’s class shows some characteristics of the lessons where the teachers attempted to incorporate the children’s earlier experiences and cultural backgrounds in their practices. The general trend in all the lessons in this category is a dualistic representation of Swedish vs. the children’s “home countries or cultures”. Theta explains in her reflections that she chose the example because, in her words, the “children with immigrant backgrounds do not have the same frames of reference as regards forests and nature as the Swedish children”. Her reference to Iraqi culture serves merely a vehicle for bridging or explaining the “Swedish culture” rather than a resource for teaching content of the curriculum. At first glance this seems like a clear-cut example of cultural essentialism (Nieto, 1999; Sleeter, 2013) where “Swedish culture” is represented as relatively distant from the Iraqi or the children’s culture. On further exploration, however, Thetas approach may be interpreted as a kind of “strategic essentialism” or leverage necessary in bridging the earlier life experiences of these newcomers to their new environment. Obviously, there are many ways of providing sufficient levels of support (scaffolding) to ensure students are able to participate fully and equitably in the curriculum (Obondo, 2011). Comparing cultures or inviting children to teach you and the class can be a useful way to make their culture visible and affirm their identities (Cummins, 1996). The excerpt from Mys class below (from category 3 lessons) shows another approach to build on the pupils’ prior knowledge and current experiences to teach new knowledge and key concepts in the curriculum.

**Excerpt 3 Mys class: what is behind the Easter story?**

This is an international class with 3–5 grades. The non-Swedish languages represented in class were Arabic, Kurdish, Somali, and Keldian. The class had both “Muslim” or “old-comers” and “Christian”, the newcomers. Mys describes the lesson context as follows:

> It was nearing Easter and I wanted the class to understand why we celebrate Easter. I narrated the Easter story freely based on the Bible, using pictures, gestures and drama. Everyone listened attentively and asked questions and gave comments. The Christian children with basic competence in Swedish could follow the story since the content was familiar; they had already heard the Easter story before and could draw on their previous experience. The Muslim children had not heard the Easter story but they became very interested in the story. I explained to these children that this is how the Bible presents it (Bible version) but the Koran and the Bible contain some similarities although there are also differences. Not everything is the same. The lesson ended with an Easter hike (påskvandring) and a visit to the nearby Pentecostal church that was mostly appreciated.

The purpose of Mys lesson was to explain the Easter story by drawing on the children’s religious and linguistic competencies. As she notes, the content was familiar to the new arrivals (Christians) because of their previous knowledge and experience; but unfamiliar for the “Muslim” children who nonetheless could engage with unfamiliar content because of their competence in Swedish. Mys approach resonates well with the studies discussed earlier on ways in which the students’ cultural knowledge can be reinforced in classroom with students with diverse linguistic and religious background (Cochran-Smith, 1995–2008; Nusche, 2009). As noted previously, teaching from the students’ strengths, i.e. respecting the cultural and linguistic knowledge the children bring to the learning contexts, impacts positively on their self-esteem and academic success. While the use of broad categorisation Christian and Muslim to describe a heterogeneous class of children from a range of nationalities can be essentialising, describing the Easter story as “the Bible version”
and the Koran and the Bible as having similarities and differences is a way of moving beyond cultural essentialism to open up for a discussion on the diversities in the religious texts. Moreover, not recognising the pupils’ religious differences means not recognising who they are, that is, their identities as members of these religious groups. The dilemma then, is how teachers can avoid cultural essentialism while at the same time recognising and working with the pupils’ culture as a basis of learning? Sleeter (2013) writing about her experiences in helping pre-service teacher students grasp the meaning of culturally responsive teaching notes that culturally responsive teaching begins with dialog and with placing oneself in the cultural context of others; The example 4, below from Etas class is a veritable example of placing the Swedish children in the position of learners of culture of the “other” as the excerpt from her lesson illustrates.

**Excerpt 4 Eta’s class: is Arabic good for Swedish children?**

This is a class with 24 pupils in grades 1–6. The languages in class are Swedish, Arabic, Chaldean Albanian, and Kurdish. Eta had asked the Arabic children if it is appropriate for the Swedish children to be immersed in Arabic.

I planned to show a film about space in Arabic with Swedish subtitles. The purpose was to “immerse” the Swedish pupils in Arabic to experience how it feels to be learning in a foreign language and how difficult it is to understand the content of the film in quickly spoken words. I showed the film for 10 min and then asked the Swedish children to guess the gist of the content and what the film was about. There was a lot of laughter when the class realised that their guesses were totally wrong! We evaluated the incident and discussed the misunderstandings that occur almost daily resulting from lack of empathy.

This excerpt is one of the few examples from a mainstream class with Swedish children and newcomers. Eta applies a different approach to the previous examples by giving a “culture immersion” to the Swedish children, to experience a different language other than their own. Eta provides a relatively brief explanation of the choice of her example and in her words, “the Swedish children must experience how it feels to begin in a new class, in a new country and with a new language”. Etas lesson serves two purposes: first to provide an experience for the Swedish children to be learners of others culture (Arabic), and second, to confirm the language identities of her students and thereby validating the knowledge of the Arabic-speaking children in the classroom. Among the concrete ways in which a teacher can draw on the linguistic resources of her students is to provide activities that make “visible” the pupils’ primary language in that way, classrooms become multilingual environments in which students native languages serve a multitude of purposes and functions (Gibbson, 2009; Lucas & Katz, 1994).

**Discussions and conclusions**

This study explored some institutional challenges and examples of pedagogical practices the participating teachers perceived as “successful” when working in culturally and linguistically diverse schools and classrooms. The analysis of the interviews shows that the general challenge experienced by most teachers are both pedagogical, structural, and organisational problems at the city council and the school and classroom levels. The teachers speak of international classes as “a school within a school”, where newcomers are segregated physically in isolated classrooms and symbolically by the labels used to define
them as “international” or non-Swedish classes, labels used to denote exclusion from the mainstream Swedish pupils. A number of recent studies have revealed similar observations when it comes to school integration of newcomers in Swedish schools. (Nilsson & Bunar, 2015; Svensson & Eastwood, 2013). The Svensson and Eastwood study of newcomers, for example, reports marginalisation and he argues that, the strongest reasons for the quick transfer of new arrivals to mainstream classes, where their existence is often not acknowledged and they are emotionally isolated, is their physical placements at the margins of the mainstream classrooms (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013).

The interviews also bring to light the pedagogical challenges faced by the teachers in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. The Swedish language and teaching the heterogeneous classes that included new arrivals with limited or no Swedish competence was named by all teachers as the major problem faced in international classes. The complex relationship between learning a new language and culture and while at the same time learning through it is well documented (e.g. Cummins, 1996). It is theoretically well established that it takes between 5–8 years to master a second language to be able to learn through it (Cummins, 1996). The nature of the challenges faced by pupils who are learning a second language and learning through it were discussed extensively during study circle sessions (Sandervärn, 2010). However, when we consider that many of these pupils are in the process of learning their second or possibly a third or fourth language, (for example, some Somali children have learnt Arabic, Italian, and English), that they typically develop a working oral fluency in Swedish within a year or two and that they make substantial progress in academic Swedish, then to characterise such development as “failure” because the pupils have not met some specific benchmarks in standardised testing is to miss completely their success as second language learners and the nature of their needs (Cummins, 2000; Gibbson, 2009; Hammond, 2009).

The teachers’ excerpts of classroom lessons provide a glimpse into their practices and what they considered “successful” teaching in a class with pupils from different cultural and linguistic groups. Each of the examples poses a dilemma because of the teachers’ dualistic representation of Swedish vs. the children’s home countries or cultures. The teachers tend to consider the children’s experience and cultural backgrounds existing in complete contrast to Swedish culture. The risks of labelling a whole group of children as Christian vs. Muslims are that the identities and experience of individual children in these groups are overlooked. Similarly, the complex and dynamic nature of culture created in these “contact-zones” or culturally diverse classrooms is lost in the static and essentialist representations of Swedish vs. immigrant cultures (Nieto, 1999. Obondo, 2011). However, if we look beyond the dualism, the comparison between cultures seems to enable the teachers to teach beyond the “cultural differences” for example teaching geography by comparing the landscape in Iraq and Sweden, and teaching language and religion using Christian celebrations to compare the Bible with the Koran.

Thus, it is important to underscore the teachers’ intentions, their objectives and the assumptions underlying their practices as explained in the interviews. It is also worth noting that these teachers do their work in a context that is fluid with constant arrival of immigrant children and in schools that operate in an educational market place where results in basic skills count more than developing practices that enable all children learn (Cochran-Smith, 1995–2008; Obondo, 2011). Thus, the analysis of the lessons presented show the teachers pragmatic solutions in response to the current situation in their school and attempts at operationalising intercultural education in a context without much support to develop practices that take notions of cultural diversity seriously.
Finally, a note about the contribution of this study. In studying the practices of teachers in newcomer classes, this study becomes one of the few studies from the Swedish provincial school districts focusing on what the teachers do rather than what they say they do. A report reviewing the Swedish research on the newly arrived pupils commissioned by Skolverket (2010) notes that studies on pedagogical practices are scarce and the existing research “does not help us much to understand the learning conditions for this group” (p. 6). As we noted earlier in the literature review, the research on multicultural education in Sweden tends to focus on social policy, attitudes of teachers and school leadership in multicultural schools (Lahdenperä, 1998, 2015). While these are important issues, for practising teachers, the question of pedagogical practice and what it entails in teaching in culturally diverse classroom is paramount. Similarly, in order to develop practice informed theory of intercultural education, the theoretical concepts need to be linked to the contextual knowledge and practices of teachers. Thus, researchers need to involve themselves more in collaborative research with teachers, school leaders, and parents to develop classroom based research that examines teaching procedures and developing grounded theories based on data from specific contexts in multicultural schools.

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