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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN*

Special Report : Sweden

Minority communities are vulnerable to many kinds of disadvantage: economic, social, cultural and linguistic. Among indigenous and migrant groups, minority status is often reflected in high unemployment and low levels of educational achievement. These in turn affect the community's perceptions of the value of their own language and culture. In such situations, parents often respond by communicating to their children a feeling that what they have - their own values and cultural traditions - are worthless; that the only way 'up' is 'out'. These problems of identity, status and value are strongly evident among people of Saamic (Lapp) and Torne Valley Finnish origin living north of the Arctic Circle. It is in the far north of Sweden that the Education Department of the University of Umeå has been working since 1979, with Foundation support, to introduce a more positive attitude to locally spoken languages, history and culture, among parents, teachers, pupils and school authorities.

Numbering about 15,000, Sweden's Saami people live mainly in the far north of the country, close to Norway, Finland and the USSR. The region's inhabitants also include people of Finnish origin, who speak Torne Valley Finnish - so named because of their proximity to the Torne River which flows down through the mountains and forests of this remote area. Until the seventeenth century, the nomadic reindeer-herding Saamis dominated the region but industrialisation, the development of mining, hydro-electric power, forestry and the growth of human settlements have reduced the natural pastures needed for reindeer herding. Today the Saamis are a minority in their original homelands. Not surprisingly, minority children in the comprehensive schools of northern Sweden have shown a marked disadvantage in gaining access to higher education and job opportunities. For a century, the northern region has had the highest unemployment rates in Sweden and a substantial proportion of the population depends on welfare benefits. Development policy encourages the young and unemployed to migrate southwards. Teachers have been brought into the region from the south, to teach the standard Swedish curriculum and there has been little contact between school, home and community.

* *Alternatives in early childhood care and education.* Report of the Bernard van Leer Foundation 1984-1985.

In 1971 the educational dilemma facing Saami parents and children was summed up as follows:

Liberty in respect of choice of schools places Saami parents in a difficult position. The children must either attend a school for nomads and be educated in their own language and culture, or they must attend an ordinary comprehensive school, which means that they will be largely deprived of instruction in Saami language and culture.

This assessment was from a report on a research project being undertaken by the Institute of Education at Umeå University. In 1979 the Institute undertook a project aimed at developing new ways of using the languages, cultures and environments of the people of northern Sweden as positive learning resources.

This approach could help children both to cope better with the educational demands of the comprehensive school curriculum, and to relate more positively to their own cultures. The challenge was to demonstrate that a community-oriented, strongly multicultural approach could reverse the pattern of school failure among minority children; that cultural diversity could become an asset rather than a problem. This ambitious goal was to be pursued within a centralised educational system which prides itself on total equality of opportunity, and which explains under-attainment by minority children as the unfortunate consequence of their parents' persistence in using their mother tongues, rather than Swedish at home. The best the system could offer was segregated education for such children. The project aimed to prove that all children can benefit from the experience of learning in a multicultural setting, provided the teacher is skilled and culturally knowledgeable.

Putting these ideas - radical in the Swedish context - into practice required a very careful process of consultation and preparation. The project team devoted most of the first year to consulting the interested parties: the educational authorities, local 'head teacher districts', teachers, parents and - most important - representatives of the minority communities themselves. These consultations led to the selection of three schools which were demographically and educationally representative of northern Sweden, whose head teachers were sympathetic to the project's aims and where parents and the local community had expressed interest.

The three schools selected were in Kiruna, Övre Soppero and Kangosfors. Kiruna, with a Swedish speaking majority, is a mining town and district capital. Its iron ore industry is in

decline, and there is high unemployment. The presence of a Space Centre is reflected in the town's optimistic slogan 'Kiruna - City of the Future', but a recent economic symposium suggests that Kiruna might be a 'ghost town' within 30 years. Övre Soppero is a village with a high proportion of people of Saami origin and an economy dependent on reindeer husbandry and agriculture. Kangosfors, with a mixed Swedish and Torne Valley Finnish population, is mainly agricultural.

The project began work in classes for children in the seven to ten years age group. The two first-grade teachers in Kiruna spoke only Swedish. The Övre Soppero teacher spoke Saami Torne Valley Finnish and Swedish, and the teacher at Kangosfors spoke Torne Valley Finnish and Swedish. Through informal training and discussion, the four teachers absorbed the thinking behind the project and contributed to the formulation of the workplan. They carried out visits to their pupils' homes to learn in detail about the day-to-day life and culture of the local families. Part-time assistants were provided so that the teachers could devote enough time to out-of-school visits and the preparation of new subject matter and materials. A Saami language specialist and a local historian were also involved in the team. The home visits and interviews with parents provided the teachers - for the first time - with knowledge of the background, languages and interests of the children and their families before they entered the school.

From four teachers in 1980, with classes totalling less than 80 children, the project has expanded. Today 130 teachers (including pre-school teachers) and about 1,500 children are involved, and more schools are now showing interest in joining the project. The project is cautious about further expansion: they see the work as an action-research project to demonstrate the possibilities. Full dissemination and institutionalisation is the responsibility of the national and local educational authorities, not the project team.

Not all the teachers who have joined the project have been convinced of its validity from the start, however. There still remains considerable prejudice. One teacher, who had years of experience behind her, said quite frankly that she was joining the project 'to prove that it wouldn't work', but even she has changed her views after being part of the project for a year or two, and is now one of its most enthusiastic advocates.

What is it that distinguishes a 'project class' from the ordinary comprehensive school classroom? Although both use the same basic curriculum, the differences are significant. In terms of

content, the project team has taken every subject in the standard curriculum and looked for local examples - in mathematics, history, geography, social studies and other subjects. Because teachers participating in the project are in close touch with parents and other community members, they are able to draw on local knowledge and expertise. All the material aspects of local and traditional culture - food, clothing, housing, means of transport, work, handicrafts and cultural activities - are employed to provide substance and enrichment of the basic curriculum.

The visitor to a 'project class' will notice immediately that the children are not distracted by his presence; they are used to parents and other community members coming into the classroom. Many project teachers have installed a stove and a coffee pot in their classrooms to help visitors feel more at home. The children also make very active use of visits outside the school. They interview local people, to find out how life was lived in the past; they compile 'oral history' tape recordings through interviews with old people in the area; they visit local tradesmen, craftsmen and farmers, and they make full use of local cultural facilities such as the outdoor museums at Kangosfors and Jukkasjärvi, where traditional Saami and Swedish houses, furniture and artefacts are displayed. Of course, teachers everywhere take their children to museums; the difference is that project teachers build these visits into the class work by much more thorough preparation and follow up: these are not 'extra-curricular' activities but an essential part of the educational process.

Ordinarily, if the child's home language is not Swedish, the child can receive two hours teaching a week in a segregated class, conducted in Saami or Torne Valley Finnish, by a special teacher. This has the effect of further undermining the minority child's confidence in his ability to function within the educational system. Project leader Professor Henning Johansson says:

"We try to use language in natural settings. What people have thought of as language problems are in fact problems of social attitudes."

The project teachers try to give each language spoken by the children in their class its own value. If the children visit a local farm or shop where only Saami is spoken, the Saami speaking children will translate into Swedish for the benefit of their Swedish-speaking classmates. This helps build up their confidence in the value of their own language and culture and gives them

a 'natural' opportunity to practice speaking Swedish. This 'playing with language' - as distinct from a formal, bilingual approach - develops children's confidence in their use of the languages they encounter at home and at school.

In 1983, when the project was working in schools in two districts, a careful evaluation of its effects was undertaken, using the standard tests applied for ten year old children. The project had sought to prove that minority children could attain the same levels as their peers, if properly taught, and that their traditionally low self-concept could be reversed. The outcomes were highly significant. Children in project classes, for the first time in the region, achieved above the level of the rest of Sweden in the most critical area of all - Swedish vocabulary and comprehension. They also approached the national mean for competence in mathematics.

The differences between project classes and control classes were significant. The results came as no surprise to Johansson:

"It was a natural development. The parents and the teachers understood why the results were better. If a child gets out into the community and is stimulated and encouraged to learn about new things; to study how things around him work; how people earn their living, then naturally his vocabulary and his comprehension will increase."

In terms of self-image, children were tested against a random sample of non-project children in the region. Their written essays - for example, on how they viewed the future - and their drawings, revealed more balanced attitudes, greater understanding of their own and other local cultures and a positive attitude to life in 'depressed' northern Sweden which contrasted with the frequently negative and unrealistic ideas and self-concepts of non-project children. Generally speaking, minority children taking part in the project exceed national norms in terms of Swedish vocabulary; learn to read and write more rapidly; are active readers, using libraries more often than their peers; and show skills of enquiry, self-organisation and independence to a greater extent than children in the traditional classes.

How does Professor Johansson see the future of the project?

"Well, we have reached the stage where we have been able to show that our experiences from the very first four teachers can be applied in these settings with different children in different places in the area. We are now working with 130 teachers and pre-school teachers. For the future, it is very important that we work with school leaders. It is of course their job to disseminate the project to the whole area. Now we are covering five broad districts of the County of Norbotten but there are seven more districts in the County.

Pre-school teachers must also be included and there is a need to influence the in-service training of the teachers. Then we also have serious questions concerning the language. Due to prejudice, especially against Thorne Valley Finnish and also the Saami language, many parents, when they come to pre-school or school with their children, have a view of their own language that results from this prejudice. We think that in the future we must do something to catch these mothers before they have their babies in order to be able to try to get them to think about their language and prepare them concerning their language and cultural situation. But that is perhaps a new project. We cannot manage it within this project but it is something we have learned and, one way or another, we must begin to work with these ideas."

In March 1986, Henning Johansson's work in the project achieved national recognition with the award of Sweden's highest honour in the educational field - the 'Golden Elephant'. Accepting the award, Johansson paid tribute to all those involved with him in the work, and went on to place the project in its wider educational, cultural and social context:

" The idea that permeates...our work with the children is that their own background and environment is a resource that can be shared with others. This may seem a very simple idea but our experience is that it can be very difficult indeed for a person who has not given it a thought before!

Today when almost every third pupil has some kind of immigrant background, hardly anybody who is interested in educational matters can ignore the problem of bilingualism.

"In our project we have consciously tried to base the education on the *children's* own background, irrespective of what it looks like. This approach implies that teachers and head teachers have to ask themselves what each child's background looks like... The teacher and school discover that knowledge can also be found outside the classroom.

What have we learned? One thing is that our pupils learn at least as much as other pupils in school. Compared with children of the same age in their home region they perform much better on knowledge tests. We have also found that, for example...they read more books promoting their linguistic development, compared with the magazines the other children of the same age read.

There is...a direct link from what seem to be simple and banal aspects of the children's environment and cultural background to the major questions of peace, freedom, justice and love in the world. So this is what our project is *actually* about."

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