

# Language policy for migrant children in Sweden. An introduction of Swedish mother tongue education in policy and practice.

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Sweden has become a multicultural society with many languages. In Sweden children have a right to language education in mother tongue as a subject in compulsory school. The National Agency of Education regulates specific principles to support the development of language skills for students with a foreign background. One is the teaching of Swedish as a second language and the other is to offer mother tongue education. Study guidance, which gives foreign students a possibility to have teaching in their mother tongue, is also regulated. The Language Center in Gothenburg provides mother tongue services for the schools in and around Gothenburg. The authors are co-directors of the Language Center and in this chapter they give a brief overview of the Swedish mother tongue education policy and the activities of the Language Center.

## ■ Mother tongue education as a right

In Sweden students with a mother tongue language other than Swedish have the right to receive education in their mother tongue. Mother tongue teaching is available to students provided the mother tongue is a living language at home and the students have a basic level of proficiency in the language. In the case of Sweden's official minority languages – Meänkieli, Sami, Romani chib and Yiddish- mother tongue education can also be provided to children who do not use the language in their everyday communication at home.

A school is obliged to organize mother tongue education if at least five eligible students apply and if a suitable teacher is allocated with sufficient skills in both Swedish and the other language. Mother tongue teaching is compulsory due to governmental regulations and policies in both comprehensive school (7-15 years old) and upper secondary school (16-18 years old). There are now over 11000

pupils in compulsory school and 1776 pupils in secondary school who receive mother tongue education. Our center offers around 70 languages.

From the beginning of the year 2016, assessment testing is regulated through a new Swedish law. Every newly arrived student with a migrant background will be conducting an assessment test within 2 months of arrival. The main purpose of this test is to look for the strengths and the needs for the student to be able to offer the best possible education from his or her personal skills. When the first two parts of the test are finished – in literacy and numeracy – the principal must quickly make a decision on the next step to take in regards to the education of the student.

## ■ Organization

The municipal authorities have the overall responsibility for the provision of mother tongue education. The municipalities have the freedom to choose how they organize education to make sure it corresponds to the guidelines and objectives laid down by the state.

In Gothenburg, the Language Center serves schools within the city of Gothenburg as well as the areas surrounding the city. Our services are based on the requests from the school units and are for children from the age of 7-19. We also provide language training for children within pre-school but unfortunately this is not on a very large scale since it is not mandatory for the preschools to offer this training.

Recently we have also reached out to other parts of Sweden through our web based learning. This is for example when distances are too far or there is a problem in finding a suitable teacher. This activity is however still under development, but we are positive it will grow in the near future.

## ■ Mother tongue teaching

Mother tongue teaching is commonly taught in separate classes outside of regular class times. The subject of mother tongue studies has its own separate curriculum which also includes literature, history and culture of the student's homeland. Study guidance and tuition is provided before and after regular classes as well as integrated in the schedule. Students who have recently moved to Sweden and have not yet learned enough Swedish to be able to follow lessons are given study guidance to have the content of the subject/lessons explained in their own language.

Mother tongue teachers conduct language training, mother tongue teaching and study guidance. They act as support to other teachers, parents and families. Parents and schools discuss individual students' needs for mother tongue study guidance. The decision whether students should receive study guidance rests with the school principal. When there is a risk that a student will not reach a grade, the school is obliged to provide study guidance.

One of the main goals of the Language Center is to develop the mother tongue teachers' pedagogical skills. We have witnessed the significant effect this has on the results for the students. Therefore we organize education for our teachers on a weekly basis. Every week all our teachers dive into various kinds of educational questions based on research and science.

The purpose is also that they – through discussions with their fellow teachers – will be able to challenge their own pedagogical experiences. This semester our focus is on reading, since this is now a project initiated by the National Agency of Education.

## ■ Challenges and opportunities

Even though Sweden is far ahead when it comes to curriculum development, the fact that most of the lessons are organized outside ordinary school hours is troublesome. Firstly, because it complicates cooperation with other classes and teachers, but also because the teaching has to compete with other activities that attract the pupils' attention during their spare time. You could say that this is a question of the status of mother tongue education, which unfortunately does not receive the recognition that it should.

Yet, research shows that mother tongue teaching is important for a student's education as a whole. Some of the positive effects of mother tongue teaching according to research are that it makes it easier to learn Swedish and other languages as well as other subjects, it leads to academic success and higher grades and it makes children and pupils at school feel more self-assured (Axelsson 2004, Bergman 2000a and Bergman 2000b, Bunar 2006, Cummins 2000, Gibbons 2006).

Our aim is of course always to recruit educated teachers. A lot of our teachers have an educational degree as teachers. Some of them have studied to become teachers in their home countries and have been able to evaluate their exam to get a Swedish diploma. Others have other academic degrees while some lack education on a

higher level. For the majority of our teachers it is impossible to obtain an educational degree as a mother tongue teacher in Sweden because the universities cannot provide courses in the language in which they wish to teach. There have however just recently been discussions to improve the prospects for our teachers.

Our Center is constantly growing partly because the number of people looking for shelter in Sweden is increasing. But we are also growing because schools are becoming more and more aware of the necessity and the positive effects of mother tongue teaching and how much it helps the pupils both socially and educationally.