

Non-Challenging Education and Teacher Control as Factors for Marginalization of Students in Diverse Settings

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Abstract

This article discusses teachers' attitudes towards immigrant students in poor settings and the effect these attitudes have on organization of education on classroom level. It draws on results from two ethnographic studies where some primary school classes in Sweden were followed with participant observation and interviews as main research methods. The article focuses on classroom activities and teachers' attitudes towards immigrant students and students with low socio-economic status. In the article is argued for the importance of presenting students in poor settings with demanding tasks and challenging education. In these cases, intellectually undemanding tasks in combination with little room for students' own initiatives resulted in low enthusiasm among students regarding schoolwork and accordingly low learning, while classroom work that demanded active involvement by students in combination with high level of students' influence on what took place in classrooms resulted in high level of students' engagement and high outcome.

Keywords: Challenging Education, Immigrant Students, Diverse Settings, Teacher Attitudes, Deficiencies

Introduction

In this article teachers' attitudes towards immigrant students in poor settings is investigated, and also the effect these attitudes have on organization of education on classroom level. During my years in teacher education in Sweden, I have been struck by the fact that so many teacher students seem to view children as vulnerable, neglected and in need of intense teacher supervision. It might be that children are perceived as legitimate objects for goodwill and nurturing, but I find it problematic when they are perceived as representing a collection of deficiencies. This seems particularly to be the case in many contexts involving children with immigrant backgrounds;

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Runfors (2003) claims that they are made to represent “a minuskultur,” a culture of deficit. Runfors shows how teachers in Sweden have constructed “immigrants” based on assumptions about defects and marginalization. Teachers in her study emphasized the need to teach Swedish to students with immigrant backgrounds and to compensate for their lack of contact with the Swedish society. They focused on the experiences the students lacked, not on those they possessed. Cases where teachers have tended to treat students with multilingual, immigrant or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds as less able have also been shown by Knapp et al. (1995), Lahdenperä (1997), Parszyk (1999), Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (2001) and Johnston and Hayes (2008).

Although students with immigrant and/or multilingual backgrounds do not constitute a homogenous group, general academic results within these groups in Sweden are below those achieved among students with monolingual Swedish backgrounds. In 2005/06, 14 % of the students in the nine-year compulsory school in Sweden had immigrant backgrounds, that is, they were either born abroad or both of their parents were born abroad (Skolverket 2009). Of these, 28 % did not pass the final exams in grade nine, while the figure for students with Swedish backgrounds who did not pass was 16 %. Of students with Swedish backgrounds, 2.4 % did not receive a final grade at all, while the figure for students with foreign backgrounds was 8 %. One out of five students with foreign backgrounds did not qualify for a national program at the Swedish gymnasium (upper secondary school, equivalent to form four to six) while the rate for students with Swedish backgrounds was one out of ten. Among students with Swedish backgrounds who took their exam in grade nine, the final year of compulsory school in Sweden, 6.4 % did not pass Mathematics and 4.4 % did not pass English in 2008. The figures for students with foreign backgrounds were 14.9 % for Mathematics and 13.6 % for English (Skolverket 2009). This means that the failing rate is more than double for students with foreign backgrounds. The educational gap between the groups is slowly widening. In Sweden, as in many Western countries, the majority of immigrants are relatively isolated, living in suburbs whose populations are largely made up of immigrants and people of low socio-economic status. This means that schools with a majority of students for whom Swedish is a second language are also schools in which many students are from low income backgrounds. In this article I will refer to this type of setting as “diverse”. The reasons for the widening gaps are many and in this article I will focus on one possible reason: teachers’ attitudes towards students in diverse settings and the effect these attitudes have on the organization of education at the classroom level. The article draws on the results from two case studies in Sweden on language and learning in classrooms in diverse settings.

Diverse classrooms and challenging education

Many teachers seem to support the “deficiency theory” regarding students in diverse settings, and this tends to marginalize these students. In her study, Runfors (2003) found that students who were denoted as immigrant children tended to be kept apart, side-stepped and subordinated in ways that diminished their range of personal initiative. Through her study in three different types of schools, she showed that students in a middle-class school in Sweden, in which students came mainly from monolingual Swedish backgrounds, were offered more opportunities to engage in individual initiatives in which the teacher acted more as a supervisor. In a mixed school, teachers often pointed out problems with immigrant students, and Runfors established that the students in question were segregated. She talks about immigrant fatigue among these teachers. In a third school, in which few students had Swedish as their mother tongue, Runfors found both teachers and students to be more enthusiastic and more engaged. While, in these immigrant-dense schools, students helped each

other and immigrant students frequently asked for help, she found that, in the mixed school, immigrant students tended to hide any lack of knowledge. From this study, one may infer that the risk of teachers focusing on the lack of Swedish-language ability among immigrant students is particularly high in a mixed setting. In a study of “programs for measures to be taken” (Sw. åtgärdsprogram) for students with immigrant backgrounds, Lahdenperä (1997) found that teachers focused on deficiencies and also that they held a compensatory view particularly towards parents with immigrant backgrounds.

Studies by Johnston & Hayes (2008) and Knapp et al. (1995) revealed a pattern of low educational demand resulting in poor academic results in schools in similar settings. According to Knapp et al., in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms in low-income areas, what teachers perceive as “good” education tends to have students working along a linear study path, progressing from basic to more advanced levels. However, while teachers focused on the basics, they seldom reached the more advanced levels. Johnston & Hayes analysed implicit classroom practices in diverse classrooms in Australia, what they called “taken-for-granted classroom practices”, and found that conventions and practices in classrooms were restricting students’ opportunities to learn. Their findings showed that teachers practised a high level of control in class and assigned intellectually unchallenging tasks, which together resulted in low student engagement. Johnston & Hayes (2008) characterized this mode of teaching as a “survival mode”.

Johnston & Hayes (2008) were surprised to find similarities in classroom patterns in all four schools in their study. Similarities included minimal literacy demands, intellectually undemanding tasks, teachers asking questions on procedural levels that required a one- or two-word response and the lack of choice given to learners regarding what they could learn, and when and where they could learn it. They reported that if students were not constantly re-engaged they lost interest in the lesson “game” and instead occupied themselves with activities such as chatting among themselves, moving around, listening to iPods, and daydreaming. Johnston & Hayes also argued that in this way teachers create “zone(s) of relative comfort” while actually restricting the learning environment. Newmann & Associates (1988) argued that students in what they call disadvantaged schools are often disadvantaged by the absence of demanding education. Also, Parszyk (1999) found teachers and students talking about undemanding teachers.

In an American study of high-poverty classrooms, Knapp et al. (1995) found similar practices, although in their study teachers sometimes offered students a greater variety of routines and strategies. They noted that on these occasions students showed more enthusiasm. They reported that teachers who tried to connect what happened in school to students’ earlier experiences also used more meaning-oriented approaches in their teaching. They also found that in classrooms where teachers exerted slightly less control and also offered a wider range of routines and varied instructional strategies, students showed greater enthusiasm for school work.

In a longitudinal school study in Australia (the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, QSRLS, 2001) teachers rated basic literacy and numeracy skills as the most important in school, while intellectual engagement and demand were rated least important. It was determined that constructivist views of learning were rarely implemented for students from traditionally marginalized groups and that some teachers avoided high intellectual quality and referred to behaviourist pedagogy instead. The conclusions in the QSRLS were that levels of intellectual demand and social support both have significant statistical correlations with improved productive performance and, hence, improved student outcomes. The study highlighted the need

for a shift in teachers' focus, from basic skills to higher-order thinking, problematic knowledge and sustained conversations, ranging from minimal to higher levels of expectation and demand. The study concluded that schools provided supportive environments and that teachers identified students' social needs. However, appropriate and effective interventions were not developed for students from diverse backgrounds nor were interventions developed to effectively improve these students' performance. Some teachers perceived making greater intellectual demands and providing social support as alternatives while the research emphasized the importance of both.

The importance of providing intellectually challenging education for second-language learners (L2 learners) in combination with high support and the explicit teaching of language has been emphasized by, among others, Cummins (1984, 2000), Cummins and Early (2011), Gibbons (2006, 2008), Hammond (2006, 2008), Schechter and Cummins (2003), and Author (2010a). These researchers oppose the tradition of modifying the curriculum for L2 learners by claiming the importance of offering students intellectually undemanding tasks. Gibbons (1998) warns that a simplified approach towards L2 learners can lead to a reductionist curriculum that works against successful second-language learning and "provides an insufficient basis for the development of a language-for-learning in school" (1998:100). Cummins (1996, 2000) shows the relation between these factors in his well-known coordinate system with two intersecting continua. One of the continua represents the degree of contextual support, where one extreme stands for context-embedded and one for context-reduced. The other shows the degree of cognitive demands in the language use or activity. This axis has at its extremes cognitively demanding and undemanding language. If the students' knowledge and experience of the topic is high, the language use has been automatized and the linguistic challenge is minimal. In the opposite case, if the students' knowledge is low, then the linguistic challenge becomes high. Teaching in a second language should, according to Cummins, start at the less demanding and concrete end but proceed through to the more highly demanding end, although still dealing with concrete tasks. Cummins (2000) uses the terms BICS and CALP for these types of language respectively, with BICS denoting conventional everyday language and CALP denoting language that is age-relevant in academic school settings. He draws attention to the difference in the amount of time required to learn BICS (1 to 2 years) and CALP (5 to 7 years). Thus, he stresses the need to provide L2 learners with age-relevant education at the same time as they receive language teaching and linguistic support to enable them to elaborate on curricular knowledge. Cummins' model has been criticized for being too simplified to describe such a complex and dynamic process as second-language acquisition (see for example Baker, 2006). However, I find that it may serve as a model for educational planning for students whose ability to communicate in Swedish as a second language has not yet reached the level that is required in school.

Gibbons (2008) argues that a high level of challenge and support favours all students, while low demands give rise to self-fulfilling prophecies. Newmann & Associates (1996) argue that all students regardless of background become more engaged when classroom activities grow more demanding. Thus all students reach higher levels in an intellectually challenging environment and justice gaps diminish within this educational format. Also, Hammond (2006, 2008) stresses the importance of providing an intellectually challenging education to L2 learners to promote the development of higher-order thinking. These scholars all stress the importance of a linguistically supportive curriculum of knowledge in combination with high-quality teaching. Gibbons (2008) gives the following examples of challenging education: students are offered opportunities to participate in higher-order thinking, transformation of information, and exploration-based activities, and they construct their own understanding by taking part in real conversations with others. These examples

challenge earlier-mentioned traditions for education in diverse settings, in which the curriculum has been reduced and simplified.

By drawing on two case studies I aim to show how teachers' attitudes and the way that they organize education in their classrooms in diverse settings may affect students' opportunities for learning.

Two Swedish cases

In the two studies I followed a number of primary school classes. The studies took an ethnographic approach and aimed at visualizing relations between students' language development and their knowledge of school subjects, with a focus on students with immigrant and/or multilingual backgrounds. Particular aims were to understand teachers' and students' assumptions and understandings about language and learning.

The classes were observed during ordinary school days and the observations were spread over different times of day and during different types of activities. I particularly tried to find occasions where knowledge of typical school subjects was presented or dealt with, such as knowledge related to mathematics, reading and writing, science and social science. As a participant observer I did not intervene in what happened in class but responded when teachers or students addressed me. Students sometimes asked me to help them or initiated conversations with me, to which I responded. Teachers sometimes approached me and commented on what was going on in the classroom and shared their plans and reflections. Apart from keeping field notes, I also collected written materials and students' written texts.

In the first study, in North School, about 350 hours were spent in two classes over a period of three years, and about half of the time was recorded. A tape recorder was placed visibly, usually near to where I sat and sometimes on particular students' desks or in the teacher's pocket. When students asked if they could listen, I arranged so that they could listen to parts where they themselves had been recorded. Students and teachers were interviewed every year. In the second study, in South School, the study focused on two classrooms in which grades three and five were taught. In these classrooms video recordings were used instead of tape recordings. In both studies teachers were interviewed at the end of each school year.

The case of North School. The school where the first study was carried out is located in a medium-sized town in Sweden. The school is small, with just over 100 students from pre-school to grade six, consisting of students from six to thirteen years of age. Most of the students in this school lived in apartments and came from relatively low-income backgrounds, while some lived in private houses. About half of the students had immigrant backgrounds, which means that one or both parents were born abroad, and most of these students lived in the apartments. Some of the parents could be considered middle class, while some were unemployed and relied on support from the welfare system.

The students with immigrant backgrounds in this school constituted a heterogeneous group. Some were born in Sweden and some abroad. Some had one parent with Swedish as the mother tongue and Swedish as the main language in the home, while some rarely spoke any Swedish with adults except in school. Some (but not all) students who did not know any Swedish were placed in a preparatory class for some months before being placed in the class where only Swedish was used. In some cases students were placed a grade below their own age level. Swedish as a second language was taught through a "pull-out model" (Thomas & Collier 1997), which means that students were taught Swedish separated from their class for some of the lessons.

This only applied to newcomers or low-performing students. Some of the multilingual students also received weekly lessons in their mother-tongue.

Teacher attitudes. All of the teachers who taught these two classes were experienced teachers who qualified in the 1970s or early 1980s. None of the teachers had special education in the role of language in learning, nor in the learning conditions required by students being educated through a language they have not yet mastered. Some of the teachers had education in special needs but none had training in teaching Swedish as a second language.

The teachers who were responsible for the main part of education in the two studied classes were asked about their students and the classes in the interview. The teachers were Maria, responsible for the class that was followed from pre-school to grade three, and John, who taught the class that was followed from grades three to six. Both focused mainly on the needs they perceived some of their students to have. They showed concern about the students they perceived as low performing. They also showed social concerns about the students, particularly as a group. Maria described her class in grade-three as “a great team”, “positive” but also as “socially unstable” and she stressed the necessity to “weld the group together and make them respect each other”. She stressed that mathematics was difficult for some of them and that “the Swedish-two boys” will have a tough time higher up in school”. When she talked about individual students she said that they “are on their way”, have to “polish some skills” and to “pick up one thing after the other” and she also said about some of them that they “hardly get anything done”.

When John talked about his class in grade six he said that many of them had lost a great deal of time and that they “need a lot”. He said that many of them had difficulty performing at all and that it “takes a lot of push and pull” (to make them do any of the assigned work). When talking about individual students he used expressions such as “does not have time to consolidate new information”, “it takes time to pull an answer put of him”, “he hasn’t got his own motor” and “it’s hard to get anything out of him”.

Concerning the high-performing students, John and Maria did not say much other than that they were “linguistically enormously developed”, “made progress” and worked “terribly well”.

Organization at the classroom level. The way that Maria and John perceived their students’ needs affected what happened in their classrooms. The main concerns that they expressed were about the needs of the low-performing students and about social needs. They did not express concerns regarding what was taught, teaching methods or level of education or whether what they were teaching suited the students. They did not express much concern about the high-performing students, which shows that they were more focused on what they perceived as problems.

There were many patterns in these two classrooms that resembled the results shown by Johnston & Hayes (2008). The atmosphere was very friendly and inclusive. Newly arrived students were welcomed and included in peer groups, and students who had recently come to Sweden and had only begun to learn Swedish were supported by teachers and peers. The tasks they were occupied with resembled those described by Johnston & Hayes (2008) in that they were largely procedural tasks and behaviourist types of exercises with little scope for arriving at individual solutions. In the lower grades, tasks were commonly related to reading, writing and mathematics and consisted mainly of drawing lines, colouring and filling in single numbers, letters or words.

The talk in class was dominated by what can be characterized as small talk or chat. Discussions about school subjects were rare, as were occasions when anyone, teacher or student, was engaged in expressing abstract, complex thoughts. Most of the time students worked individually or in small groups while they chatted with each other, and the teacher walked around the classroom assisting those who called for help. As a result, the main part of the classroom interaction consisted of dialogues with fragmented speech, overlapping speech, frequent repairs and interruptions (see Author 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2011).

One example of work that followed a behaviourist pedagogy, and that did not promote or demand complex language use, was a study kit that was used in all classes in this school, and hence also in the two classes in this study. The study kit, named Pilen (The Arrow), was used from the second term in grade one to the end of grade six, and its importance was emphasized by all teachers. Teachers and the study kit's producers claimed that the kit developed students' linguistic skills, although in reality it was limited to written Swedish. The study kit consisted of cards and worksheets that students were supposed to work through following a fixed order. I never observed a teacher initiating a change in this pre-planned order. There was little or no room for students to use creative language in the tasks, and opportunities to make individual choices were minimal. When students happened to do a task out of its planned order, this was corrected by the teacher. The exercises trained discrete skills out of context, such as changing nouns from singular to plural or joining different given morphemes to form words. Reading and writing consisted of single words or short sentences, and the writing mainly entailed copying from the cards. The work was for the most part done individually, except when students were required to play a game. A game could be a competition where the one who first reached a certain goal, such as getting five dots, won. Students were not explicitly required to talk during these activities, but as they usually sat in pairs during work they chatted and asked each other about different tasks.

The tasks were not cognitively demanding and, as they were of a type that mainly tested students' skills, they did not give students many chances to produce language of their own, apart from the small talk they engaged in. One example from grade three of how the work was carried out involves an immigrant boy working with a sheet with a number of nouns, each preceded by a line on which he was expected to fill in *en* or *ett* (indefinite article in singular). He came to the noun *barr* (needles), which he seemed not to know. Then he asked his classmate sitting next to him: "Vad ska det vara här?" (What should it be here?) and received the answer: "ett", which he wrote on the line. Thus he did not learn the meaning of the word but solved the task by writing down the word given by his classmate.

Some high-performing students quickly developed fluency in reading and writing and they used some of the time in class reading and writing extended texts. Others were late in developing literacy skills and were observed to mainly read and write single words or sentences right up into the higher grades. Most of the immigrant students were among this group. Some of the immigrant students were barely observed to read anything even in grade six, only writing texts of a few lines and only with great support from a teacher.

In the higher grades students were sometimes arranged in groups to work on various projects. Here students had some opportunity to choose tasks, such as what part of Sweden to focus on or whom to work with. However, within the project groups, those students who had reached high proficiency in reading and writing were the ones who did the reading and writing for their groups, while others mainly occupied themselves with activities such as throwing things at each other, tilting their chairs or

daydreaming (Author 2010a). Consequently, low-performing students were observed to read and write very little during class time. It may be noted that, regarding reading, some of the low-performing students said in interviews that they never read outside school while some of the more proficient readers claimed that they preferred to read at home and not in school as they found the school environment not good for reading. This means that, although the low performers in reading and writing did not engage in much reading and writing in school, it may be the case that they did even less outside school.

The following is one example of a conversation during science lessons. It is from grade four, where a group of six students are looking for information about the Swedish island Öland. One of them, Malin, is doing the writing while Lena reads from a book about the island. This is supposed to be presented to the class afterwards.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 LENA: Em ... (läser) högsta höjd XXX 57 | LENA: Um ... (reads) the highest point XXX 57 XXX um ... ee the greatest |
| 2 XXX m ...ee största bredden på Öland är cirka | breadth of Öland is about 20 ... kilometres and the greatest length of Öland is 130 kilometres |
| 3 20... kilometer och Ölands största längd | |
| 4 är 130 km | MARIA: Number of inhabitants |
| 5 MARIA: Antal invånare | MALIN: The-the highest point of Öland |
| 6 MALIN: Den den största höjden på Öland | MARIA: Highest point? |
| | MALIN: Yes |
| 7 MARIA: Största höjden? | MARIA: The highest um ... |
| 8 MALIN: Ja | LOVE: Um ... can't one of us write um questions |
| 9 MARIA: Den störs em ... | (a howl in the background) |
| 10 LOVE: Em ... kan inte nå utav oss skriva em 11 ... frågor | MALIN: So |
| 12 (Tjut i bakgrunden) | LENA: But that's what we do all the time |
| 13 MALIN: Så | MARIA: Um |
| 14 LENA: Men det gör vi hela tiden | (A howl) |
| 15 MARIA: Mm | MALIN: Um there it was the highest point |
| 16 (Tjut) | LENA: Yes um ... the highest point is |
| 17 MALIN: Mm där var det störs höjd | MALIN: 57 |
| 18 LENA: Ja em ... den största höjden är ... | LENA: Yes 57.4 |
| 18 MALIN: 57 | MALIN: (writes) dot four metres above the sea level |
| 19 LENA: Ja 57,4 | LENA: Yes um ... dot a |
| 20 MALIN: (skriver) komma 4 meter över havet | MARIA: Um ... dot a dot h dot well |
| 21 | LOVE: Um ... number of inhabitants XXX yes but that we have XXX |
| 22 LENA: Ja em ... punkt ö | AMIR: Kalmar is that is |
| 23 MARIA: Em ... punkt ö punkt h punkt happ | MALIN: Um ... their county is Kalm Kalmar |
| 24 LOVE: Em ... antal invånare XXX ja | LENA: Öland the county of Öland ... wait |
| 25 men det där har vi XXX | |

- 26 AMIR: Kalmar e de e ... the greatest county landscape of Öland
 27 MALIN: E ... deras län är Kalm Kalmar ... wait ... the greatest county of Öland
 28 LENA: Öland Ölands län ... vänta ... AMIR: Yes
 29 Ölands största län landskap ... vänta ... MALIN: No wait the county of Öland
 30 Ölands största län LENA: The county of Öland is called Kalmar
 31 AMIR: Ja MALIN: Yes that'll be fine
 32 MALIN: Nej vänta Ölands län
 33 LENA: Ölands län heter Kalmar
 31 MALIN: Ja det blir bra

In this example we see that the main work is done by Lena and Malin, the two high-performing girls. Maria also contributes to the work, but she is a slow reader and throughout the work she is usually one step behind, such as in the beginning of this excerpt when she reads the question about number of inhabitants from their question paper while Malin and Lena work with the highest point. The three boys in the group, Love, Amir and Valton, are mainly occupied with other things not connected to the group work. Love tries to involve himself in the group's work twice in this example, in line 10 where he suggests that one of them should write questions and Lena answers that this is what they are doing, and in line 24 where he talks about the number of inhabitants. This time Lena and Malin seem to ignore him as they work on writing about the highest point and go on reading about the county. Amir has a short turn where he mentions Kalmar while Valton is not verbally involved in the work at all. This pattern, with a few students being occupied with the assigned task while the majority show little enthusiasm or occupy themselves with other things, was common during class time. It may be noted that the teacher's low expectations of these three boys had been adopted by the girls, who did not demand that they involve themselves in the work.

Similar to the classes studied by Johnson & Hayes (2008), students in these classrooms had little chance to make their own choices, and they showed little enthusiasm towards the school work. Particularly low-performing students needed to be motivated by the teacher repeatedly so that they would do the assignments. This was especially true with regard to boys, and in grades four to six it was true of all immigrant students.

One school day. To give an impression of life in these two classes, a glimpse of two school days will be given, the first one in grade one and the second one in grade five. The days have been chosen to represent what commonly happened in the classrooms.

Grade One, May 11th

8:15 Students drop in to the classroom. They walk around, talking to their classmates and move towards their individual benches, where they sit down. Some bring notebooks, pencils or other things that they put in their individual drawers. The teacher, Maria, comes in and puts her bag close to her table. She unpacks some things and arranges them on her table. A school assistant comes in and sits on a sofa.

8:20 Maria stands in front of the class, at the blackboard. She calls in those students who are still out in the corridor. They come in and sit at their desks. Some small talk is going on. The teacher calls for attention. She tells the children to put their homework in front of them on their desks. One of the children is called up to draw the calendar and to tell the class the day, the date and the food that will be served at lunch.

8:35 Maria starts to talk about a task with geometry boards that they are going to work with later on. She turns to talking about flowers that the children were supposed to have picked on their way to school and bring in to press. Then she starts to talk about an excursion they will be going on the next week. After that she talks to one of the students about a written story she has found, and then she starts to give instructions to the class for the work with the geometry board.

8:45 Students start to work individually with the geometry boards.

9:10 Maria tells them to put the geometry boards on a table and to sit down at their desks. Then she reads a story to the class.

9:20 Students are sent out for a study break.

9:45 Students come in and are instructed to take out their individual books for reading. They sit down at different places to read. The assistant sits with one student and reads with him.

10:25 Lunch break

11:40 Students come in and sit down at their desks, chatting. Maria calls for attention and starts the lesson by reminding the students to bring clothes for the sports lesson next day. The students take out individual work on the alphabet.

12:10 Maria and the class sing an ABC song that is played on the tape recorder.

12:20 They all go out to the playground. Maria hands out skipping ropes and all of the children start to jump in groups that they arrange themselves.

12:55 In the classroom again. Maria hands out a test with figures in the shapes of circles, loops, summits and eights. Students are supposed to follow the lines with their pencils and then to construct their own figures.

13:20 Maria collects the papers. Students put their chairs on the tables and Maria finishes the day by saying goodbye.

In this classroom there is little room for students to take initiative, and the level of intellectual demand is low. The atmosphere is friendly and calm, but students are not challenged during their school work. Students' enthusiasm is low, but they engage with the work they are given. They show more enthusiasm when singing and skipping rope than when working with the alphabet and the test. There are few examples where students are required to think creatively and independently. However, most of the tasks are context-embedded and thus those students who have quite recently started to learn Swedish are also included in the work and are involved in the tasks, such as working with the geometry boards. The impression is given that they are included and engaged in the tasks, but the question is, what do they learn? During the work with the geometry boards, for example, students worked individually and then showed each other the patterns they made, but no names of geometric shapes were mentioned either by the teacher or the students. Thus what students actually did was form shapes and chat. Similar observations were made during other types of exercises—that children did not focus on what they were supposed to focus on. One example was when children worked with scales, comparing the weight of different things and writing the results down. In this case most students focused on getting the "right" guess on their papers and comparing with their peers rather than actually estimating and guessing in advance.

The following is an example of a day in grade five.

Grade Five, May 7th

8:15. The teacher, John, walks around the classroom and prepares for the day. Students walk around or sit at their tables, chatting with each other, taking things out of their bags or desks.

8:20 John starts to talk about the day. An extra teacher enters the classroom. One student is called to the table to draw the calendar and say what the date is and what food is going to be served for lunch. Students who know somebody with the same name as the current name day raise their hands and in turn mention the person. John starts to call attention to those who are chatting and proceeds to give a short overview of the day. Then he gives the class the instructions for a game on the geography of the Nordic countries. Students are quite unfocused and the instructions are interrupted by questions and small talk. Students start to play the game and the extra teacher sits down at the table of two immigrant students and helps them play. When students have finished playing, John tells them to take out their maths work.

9:45 Break

10:05 English lesson: John instructs the students to play a vocabulary game in pairs. For some students the words are easy and the level of enthusiasm among these students is low, while others do not know the words and need help from their classmates. When students have finished, John tells them to take out their group work on nations and to prepare for presentations.

10:50 Lunch

11:40 Students present the work they have done in groups on different nations. The nations are chosen according to some students' backgrounds: Finland, Somalia, Turkey and Kosovo. Students are attentive but they have difficulty understanding what is said by their classmates. When the groups ask a few questions about their presentations the classmates seldom know the answers.

12:20 Students start to work with *Pilen*.

12:50 Short break

13: 00 Work with *Pilen* continues.

13:35 Students put their work away, put their chairs on their desks and then John dismisses the class for the day.

Although the assignments in grade five were more varied than in grade one students were still not given the freedom to plan their own work regarding what, when and how to study. For some of the students the level of the work was too low while for others it was too high. Note the routine in which one student draws the calendar and says the date, a routine that had begun in pre-school and continued through grades one to six. The only thing added through the years was the reading of the name day, which started in grade four, and students mentioning some people they knew with that name. Note also that the name days include predominantly Swedish names, while half of the students had immigrant backgrounds. This routine may have had a disciplinary function, helping students focus on the start of the school day, but it did not challenge students or increase their enthusiasm.

The main activities consisted of constructed exercises that were not very cognitively demanding, offering few challenges to students who were highly proficient. As in grade one, the social climate was friendly. Yet students showed low levels of enthusiasm and concentration. The boys in the class had to be encouraged repeatedly to engage in any of the required work. As only 14 students were left in the class at this time and there

were usually two teachers present, some of the students were frequently given individual support. This was true particularly of the immigrant students and some of the other students who showed low performance. The work was more context-reduced at this stage and the level of understanding and involvement of some of the students was low. This was the case, for example, during the group work in the earlier example where we could see that reading and writing was done by high-performing students while the others tended to occupy themselves with other things.

The case of South School. South School, the school in focus in the second study, is situated in a large town in Sweden. In South School roughly half of the students had multilingual backgrounds and teachers estimated that half of the students in the school had not yet reached a level in Swedish-language proficiency that was expected of students of their age. Similar to North School, some students came from families of a relatively high socio-economic status while the majority came from more or less poor or low-income backgrounds. Despite the diversity in the school and a high number of students with special needs, the school was known to receive good results, for example, in the national exams. The school was highly regarded for its educational outcomes, and teachers expressed a high level of awareness of the needs of both students with special needs and students with immigrant backgrounds. Several of the teachers had attended various in-service courses, including courses on education for students developing Swedish as a second language. Teachers stressed the need for challenging education, and they demonstrated awareness about language development among students. Some of the teachers organized their teaching according to the Systemic Functional Linguistics theory (Halliday 1993, Gibbons 2006, 2008), which stresses the importance of focusing on language development in the context of all school subjects. Here examples will be taken from grades three and five, the classes of Anna and Nina.

Teacher attitudes. In interviews, both Anna and Nina stressed the potentials and abilities they saw in the students and talked about their progress. Anna's classroom, grade three, may be characterized as highly diverse, with some of the students being "the cream of the crop" while others had been diagnosed with autism and/or with severe language disorders. While some children came from high-status families, others came from homes of low socio-economic status and homes with criminal backgrounds. In the interview Anna talked about the importance of maintaining a sense of humour and compassion, and she stressed the need to create a spirit of community in the class. She talked about her students as melodramatic saying that there were "many artists, sentimentalists" in the class and that they were "an impatient class". She said "they are at all ends but they need to be framed in" and "there is lots of talent here, but there is the matter of keeping order".

Nina talked about individual students as either having high standards or having "developed tremendously well", and she used words such as "exceptionally", "marvellous emphatic ability", and "giant vocabulary" when she described the development and performance of the students. Concerning the development of one student she said, "He had a decline when he was sort of ... tired but then he made tremendous progress again."

Organization at the classroom level. The focus that Anna and Nina placed on students' potentials, abilities and progress was visible in the organization of their classrooms. Students in both classrooms were active and enthusiastic. Anna in particular put a great deal of energy into getting students' attention and getting them to focus on what they were supposed to be doing. In the mornings, and in other cases when she wanted to gather the class for joint conversation or discussion, she would gather them in a ring on a mat at the front in the classroom. The following example is

from one morning — the first one after the midwinter holiday. Fourteen students, the teacher and an assistant teacher sat around the blue mat. Anna started by making sure she had the students' attention. She counted "one, two, three: Good morning!" and the whole class answered "Good morning" in chorus. She stated that one of the girls, Marie, had got a tan as she had just returned from a holiday trip to Thailand. She asked Marie about the holiday and Marie had started to tell the others about it when she was interrupted by a parent who entered the classroom and asked about some homework for her child, who was ill. Marie continued to tell her story but Anna asked her to wait and rose to attend to the parent. After a few minutes the parent left and Anna sat down again. She made sure everybody was listening again before she asked Marie to continue:

Marie: Ja och sen fick vi åka en jättejätte stor båt som var jättefin den var så här vit hela den var vit den var så här

Marie: Yes and then we got to go with a huge boat; that was very nice, it was like white all of it was white it was sort of

Anna: Är det som man åker ut till öar då ... den båten

Anna: Is it that you take to islands then ... that boat?

Marie: Ja... em och då så vi fick sitta där uppe ... det fanns så här som staket så fick man sitta där framme vid båten där uppe alltså vid taket det fanns sånt här staket (visar med händerna) där kan man sitta då och vinden blåste så jag kunde inte andas jag bara A-A-A (drar efter andan och skrattar) det var asroligt och sen ... i ... ee när vi var på stan

Marie: Yes ... um, and then we could sit up there ... it was this sort of fence so you could sit there in front of the boat, that is, at the roof there was this fence (shows with her hands) so you can sit then and the wind blow so that I couldn't breathe I like A-A-A (pretends to have lost the breath and laughs) it was awesome and then ... in ... um when we were in town.

Anna: What town are you in then?

Anna: Vilken stad är det man är i då?

Marie: Um it is wait ... it is Patong ... Patong isn't it or no Puket no...

Marie: Mm det är vänta ... det är Patong ... Patong är det väl eller nej Puket nej

Anna: To me you can say whatever one and we'll believe it

Anna: Mig kan du säga vilket vi går på vilket som helst

Marie: Yeah and then am

Marie: Ja och sen då am

Anna: Patong or Puket um

Anna: Patong eller Puket am

Marie: Och sen så sen när vi när vi var på stan då så det var massor såna där som säljer saker alltså det var så himla många och så sen så här kommer dom så här: "Ei tuk tuk!" (sträcker upp höger arm i vädret) eh det är taxi så säger dom "Ei tuk tuk!" (höger arm upp) och så här på pappa (slår med armen på kamraten till höger) bara för att man ska få så där taxi eller ja

Marie: And then, well then when we, when we were in town there were lots of these who sell things, that is there were amazingly many and then there they come like this: "Ei tuk tuk" (puts her right arm up in the air) eh that's taxi so they say "Ei tuk tuk" (right arm up) and like this on dad (hits the girl to her left with her arm) just in order that you get this taxi or yes

She continued by talking about the pools, and beaches, and when she finished, one classmate who did not yet have a high level of Swedish said:

Arin: Men vänta ... om man springer och sen bara åker in i den där början på bassängen så bara sjunker man

Arin: But wait ... if you run like this and then go into that beginning of the pool then you only sink

Anna assumed that what he meant may not be understood so she tried to clarify: "He means if it becomes deep all at once in the pool." Arin verified this with "Yes" and Marie answered that this was the case.

In this case Anna used Marie's experience to give her the opportunity to take the floor. She explained afterwards that the reason she chose to ask Marie and give her so much time during that morning assembly was that Marie was among those who seldom spoke out in class and that she usually did not narrate with cohesion. Anna made sure that Marie got the attention of all the students and she supported her by asking her strategic questions. Afterwards, when Arin had problems expressing his question, she supported him by clarifying the meaning of the question. By ensuring the attention from all students and giving support, she managed to engage students in real conversation and to give one student an opportunity to take the role as knower. In similar ways she often related to students' experiences and tried to make the most of their initiatives when possible. She explained in the interview that she wanted to build on students' experiences although she had to make sure that all students got their chance and thus had to hold some of the more talkative ones back sometimes.

In the grade five classroom, the teacher, Nina, also made a point of keeping a level of teaching that challenged all students and related to students' own interests. She planned the work by using different types of teaching aids and did not follow pre-made plans in particular study kits. When students were doing individual work they were involved with various types of tasks and on different levels. In the centre of the classroom there was a computer, which was usually being used by one of the students. There was another computer in one corner, and there were also some laptops available. Students used the computers to work on different learning programs but also to work on their own home pages or, less frequently, to search for information on the Internet. Three of the boys would bring their own memory sticks from home to work on their own home pages.

During the lesson from which the following example is taken, students worked individually on different types of tasks. Ten students were in the classroom and two of them were practising multiplication together at a table. Two girls worked with geography using programs on the computers. One boy was at a computer writing a text about his favourite interest, motocross training. One boy and a girl were reading fiction and two boys worked on a project about famous artists. One of the boys, Victor, spent extended time at the computer. He had brought some pictures on his memory stick and was editing them in Photo Shop for his home page.

Nina, the teacher, walked around in the classroom helping students who needed help or just sitting down to listen to questions on their individual work. Most of the time she spent with three of the students who she thought needed extra support. She started with the two boys practising multiplication. Then she sat down a while with the girl who was reading and talked with her about the book. After about 20 minutes she came to Victor, sat down on a chair next to him and asked him to explain what he was doing. He explained about his work on the home page, pointing out things on the screen as he talked, and Nina listened attentively and watched the screen. Then she said:

N: Ok ja ... ja jag kan inte det där alltså men jag förs ... jag vet att eller jag kan inte göra det själv men jag förstår det ja ... jag kanske skulle sätta mig och träna ... jag tycker att jag skulle vilja ha en hemsida kanske det vore kul ... mm vad tänker du göra idag då?

N: Ok yes ... yes I don't know that that is I unders... I know or I can't do it but I understand it yes ... maybe I should sit down and try it out ... I think that I'd like to have a home page, maybe that would be fun ... um what are you going to do today then?

V: Det här gjorde jag idag ... den här själva V: This I did today ... this the very button
knappen

N: Jaha ok

N: Yeah ok

V: Det här är exakt samma description som
jag har

V: This is exactly the same description that I
have

While Victor explained, he flipped between pages, scrolled on a page and pointed at the screen to indicate what he was talking about. Note that he used the English “description” instead of the Swedish *beskrivning*. Nina followed and watched attentively. After a while she nodded her head to show that she understood. She said, “Perfekt!” (Perfect) and continued to another student.

In these two examples we see that students concentrate on their work and that there is room for students’ initiatives. If we relate to Gibbons’ description of challenging education, we see that in this classroom there is not only room for individual construction of knowledge and authentic conversation, but also that there is room for switching expert-learner relations. In both examples students became experts and the teacher agreed to take the role of the learner, without losing control over the classroom.

Both Anna and Nina made room for students’ initiatives and gave them responsibilities while keeping the level of demands high and making sure students focused on their work.

One school day. To create an image of life in the classrooms of Anna and Nina I will give an overview of a day from grade three.

8:25 Morning assembly. Students are gathered on the mat in front of the classroom. After some small talk Anna focuses the students’ attention on the date and the schedule for the day. She explains generally what will happen and writes in English on the whiteboard. One of the students complains about some classmates’ behaviour in relation to her birthday party and Anna reminds her that birthday parties have to be discussed outside class and that this is because some children may have them while others may not, as their families are unable to afford them.

8:40 Anna starts to talk about a new theme in science, the ear and hearing. She starts by asking the students what they know about the topic. Students raise their hands and the talk continues.

9:10 Anna shows a short film about the ear and hearing.

9:15 She tells the students to go back to their desks. She asks them if they learned anything new. She takes the class’s lizard out of his terrarium to show his ears. When some boys start to talk about other things not related to the topic she asks them, “Boys, should this be about you or about hearing?” and the boys answer, “Hearing”. She continues: “Are you to be brought up or to learn?” and they answer, “Learn”.

9:45 Break

10:05 Mathematics lesson. Anna starts by presenting some multiplication and division questions. She instructs them to work together and the students work in groups to solve mathematic problems based on a zoo.

10:40 Students go to another part of the school where they have their music lesson with another teacher.

11:30 The music teacher sends them to lunch.

12:10 English lesson. Students work on a story about Pippi Longstocking in English. Anna has copied the book and they start by reading a few pages together. Anna reads first and the students read after. She explains some words and phrases. Then students read the text aloud in pairs.

12.50 Silent reading. Students take out their books and read silently. Every student has borrowed a book from a shelf in the classroom or from the school library.

13.30 Anna asks students to put the books away and dismisses the class.

As we can see, Anna put a great deal of effort into making the students focus on the school work. This became apparent when she refused to let talk about birthday parties occupy too much time and when she reminded the boys to focus on the topic of the lesson. In the three topics that were dealt with, English reading, multiplication/division and hearing, we can see that pre-fabricated teaching aids were not used as the basis for planning but were used as supplementary resources, such as the film about hearing. In English, Anna tried to make the lesson authentic and put it into a natural context by using English when she presented the schedule for the day and using a storybook as the basis for a lesson. It should be noted that English is taught as a foreign language starting in grade three, which means that these students had only just started formal English learning. When introducing the topic of hearing, Anna made an effort to start from students' prior knowledge and also provided students with an opportunity to give feedback after the film. The tasks in Mathematics were of a type that demanded engagement from all students in the groups, and the groups were small enough to ensure that all were involved in solving the problems.

Teacher attitudes and organization at the classroom level. Although I state that there are many similarities between what happened in the classrooms of Maria and John in North School, and in those of Anna and Nina in South School, there are certain differences in attitude and classroom organization. While the North School teachers mainly assigned procedural-level tasks, in the South School classrooms there were examples of challenging lessons and opportunities for students' influence over their learning. Maria and John seemed to adhere to what Runfors (2003) called a deficiency theory regarding their students, which results in undemanding education and a high level of teacher control regarding learning. Anna and Nina, on the other hand, may be characterized as holding a theory of ability and potential regarding their students. In their classrooms we see a high level of student involvement. In the classrooms of Maria and John, tasks were mainly procedural and questions rarely demanded more than one- or two-word answers. While work in their classes was mainly based on teaching aids, followed from the first stage to the last, students in Anna's and Nina's classes were assigned work that demanded active involvement. When comparing the morning routines in the classrooms, we see that Maria and John followed a strict formula, for example, having students in each grade say what the date is, whereas Anna took a more flexible approach, inviting a student to talk about a personal experience. This flexibility, along with Anna's use of English when writing the schedule, placed more demands on students and enabled them to influence what took place in the classroom. Nina's inclusion of students' personal interests in school work, by having them design home pages, for example, gave students opportunities to develop particular skills. By making room for students to work with topics she herself had not mastered, Nina extended the potential for learning. These types of skills were not observed in the classrooms of Maria and John.

As may be expected, Anna's and Nina's students performed well in national tests, while the students of Maria and John did not.

Language use in the classrooms. Linguistic factors in the school situation are particularly relevant for students who have not yet achieved the expected proficiency level in the language of instruction, in this case Swedish. In North School, language may be characterized as fragmented. Talk consisted mainly of short statements, in the form of small talk. Rarely did anyone, student or teacher, take the floor to express complicated thoughts or to talk about school subjects; in fact, the school subjects were seldom talked about at all. Most of the students for whom Swedish was a second language spent very little time reading or writing, and usually what they read or wrote consisted of single words or short sentences. In South School, in contrast, there were more frequent lengthy discussions, in which complex thoughts were expressed. Through small-group work, which demanded active participation of all students, language use became more varied; this applies mainly to oral expression, but also to written forms. Teachers focused on the form of the language by directing students' attention to words, phrases and styles, and also on its use by ensuring that students were given opportunities to use language in demanding situations in both oral and written forms, as in the case of Marie's narration about her experiences in Thailand. The higher level of engagement among students in the classrooms of Anna and Nina also had an effect on the amount of reading and writing done by students. When considering that the low-performing students in Maria's and John's classes claimed to read and write only in school, classroom organization stands out as of particular importance for the development of these students' literacy skills.

Discussion

I conclude that some of the teachers studied in these projects seem to hold a deficiency perspective, as did the teachers in the studies by Runfors (2003), Knapp et al. (1995) and Johnston & Hayes (2008). However those two teachers who dared to risk giving responsibility to students, to change roles and take the role of learner, to give the floor to students and at the same time to demand students' attention and require them to focus on their work may be characterized as holding a perspective of ability, potential and development.

In the examples from North School, students' proficiency was low and so were the cognitive and linguistic demands of their school work. The classrooms were inclusive in the sense that students took care of each other and made sure that new students were included, but tasks in the classrooms seldom challenged students' thought processes. In earlier grades, when tasks were context-embedded, students who had recently started to acquire Swedish were involved in classroom activities, but in the higher grades second-language students whose proficiency in Swedish was low tended to occupy themselves with other things and needed to be re-engaged constantly by the teachers.

As in the cases studied by Johnston & Hayes (2008) and Knapp et al. (1995), in these classrooms students spent most of their time occupied with lower-order intellectual tasks, showed little enthusiasm and poor concentration. Similar to the results of the QSRLS (2001), in this case the teachers seemed to identify social needs and to provide a socially supportive environment in school but at the cost of academic challenges. While students seldom actively opposed the teachers' efforts, the energy they invested in classroom activities remained low. Furthermore, the students' level of engagement decreased over the years.

In the classrooms from South school, however, classroom work that demanded active involvement by students in combination with high level of students' influence on what took place in classrooms resulted in high level of students' engagement and high outcome. It is interesting to see that also the actual amount of reading and writing done

by students, particularly among students from low income backgrounds, was higher in these classrooms. That teachers gave room for students to develop skills in areas where students' knowledge went beyond the teacher's extended students opportunities for learning. In the technology intensive development we see today this is particularly important.

High teacher control over content and learning seemed to be linked to low student engagement in these studies also, while low teacher control in combination with high control regarding focus on learning was linked to high student engagement and high outcome. The results highlight the risk of treating immigrant students, as well as other students from socio-economically unprivileged backgrounds, as less competent and less able than those from other backgrounds. A focus on basic skills at the cost of a demanding and challenging education denies students equal opportunities to achieve academic success. Ensuring that all students have access to an education that is linked to their experiences and builds on their potential is a democratic issue. In any school with democratic aspirations, teachers need to be aware of each student's potential. Social, economic or linguistic background should not exclude any student from access to an exciting and challenging education. This means that teachers need to dare to decrease their control of details in the learning process, such as when and how different things are learned. In order to create classrooms where negotiated interactive learning takes place, teachers need to present students with intellectually demanding tasks and challenging education.



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ⁱ That is, the boys who had Swedish as a second language.