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Turbulent Ports in a Storm: The Impact of Newly Arrived Students Upon Schools in Sweden

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Abstract

In the last decade war, social conflicts, and environmental catastrophes in Asia, the Middle East and Africa have contributed to an increased stream of refugees to Europe. Sweden was no exception and the increased number of asylum seekers made heavy demands on municipalities, including school systems. School leaders and teachers in Europe experienced increasing diversity followed by new and complex challenges (see Tuters & Portelli, 2017). This exploratory study takes place in Sweden and includes interviews with four principals whose schools received a variety influx of refugee students, many of whom arrived as unaccompanied minors, during fall 2015 through spring 2016. We use Turbulence Theory as our theoretical framework. The article's purpose is to explore how school leaders managed to adjust their organization in order to fulfill their responsibilities concerning newly arrived students during that period.

Introduction

War, conflicts and environmental catastrophes in Asia, the Middle East and Africa have contributed to an increased stream of refugees. While the majority stay within their own country or seek protection in neighboring countries, others try to find refuge in Europe or North America. In 2015 there was a great refugee migration towards and within Europe. Media labeled the situation as the 'European refugee crisis' due to the volume of asylum seekers that crossed the borders and the challenges that followed. Sweden, with its 10 million inhabitants was no exception and the increased number of asylum seekers, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, was unprecedented. Migration increased from 81,301 asylum seekers in 2014 to 162,877 in 2015 (Migrationsverket, 2017 [The Migration Agency]). In the fall of 2015, this number challenged the reception system at all levels, as well as societal institutions, and greatly impacted public opinion. Public voices calling for a restrictive migration policy were raised, and the

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rhetoric from the government concerning migration became tougher. The situation was described in media as a “migration crisis” and a “national system collapse”. The Swedish Democrats, a far-right party who already had restrictive immigration political positions, received increased support. Consequently, the situation made heavy demands on municipalities, school leaders and educators in Europe and North America who experienced increasing diversity followed by new and complex challenges (see Tuters & Portelli, 2017).

This exploratory study takes place in Sweden and includes interviews with four principals whose schools received an influx of refugee students, many of whom arrived as unaccompanied minors, during the fall of 2015 through spring 2016. The paper’s purpose is to explore how they, as school leaders, managed to adjust their organization in order to fulfill their responsibilities concerning newly arrived students during that period. The article opens with a brief overview of the Swedish educational school system with focus on newly arrived students followed by our study’s focus and research questions. Thereafter, the study’s theoretical framework and methodology are presented followed by findings and our conclusion.

The Multicultural Context of Swedish Education, Policy and Practice

The body of migrant students consist of several subgroups based on legal categorization: children with residence permits, undocumented children, asylum-seeking children (with or without custodians) and children granted refugee status. The category ‘newly arrived students’ are those who have lived abroad and commenced their education in Sweden when they were seven years of age or older within the last four years (Andersson, Lyrenäs & Sidenhag, 2015).

Regardless of category, all children between 7 and 16 years of age registered in a municipality are subject to compulsory school attendance, no matter their legal status. That includes newly arrived students’ right to education, whether they have a residency permit or not. Education policy documents promote an equivalent and equitable education for all students, with the understanding that education should be adapted to each student’s circumstances and needs, based on the student’s background, earlier experiences, language and knowledge, irrespective of where in the country it is provided (Skollagen, 2010:800 [Education Act]). “Teaching must consider children and pupils of different needs. They shall be given support and stimulus to promote their development. The ambition is to counter-balance the children’s and students’ different prerequisites to profit by teaching” (Skollagen 2010:800, 1 kap, §4). All teachers, regardless of subject or grade, have a joint responsibility for students’ development in language and subjects as well as social and academic goals. One measure to compensate for different levels of ability is the subject SSL, (Swedish as Second Language), an

independent subject with its own syllabus. Additionally, students’ right to a bilingual scaffolding of learning constitutes a support for learning as well as their right to mother tongue studies, i.e., approximately one lesson per week aiming to develop the student’s mother tongue.¹ It is voluntary for municipalities to establish introductory classes. The recommendation is that the time in this kind of schooling should be as short as possible with an individual plan for each student’s transition to mainstream class.

The upper secondary school for students between 16-18 years of age is voluntary, free of charge and open for asylum seekers. For newly arrived students the Language Introductory program is available. The program’s purpose is to strengthen students’ language skills and qualify them for other national programs. All programs are embraced by the same legislation mentioned above.

When Policy Meets Practice

Since the policy and regulations mentioned above have not specified reception and organization concerning migrant students, the implementation has been left to the schools (Skolinspektionen, 2009; 2014; 2017 [The School Inspectorate]). Nilsson and Bunar (2015, p. 7) found that the absence of national guidelines might be located in an “ideological belief that newly arrived children, receptive to language, acquisition and acculturation will smoothly blend into schools’ social and pedagogical contexts.” There have therefore been different interpretations of SSL, bilingual scaffolding for learning and mother tongue tuition and further, a variety of organizational models: introductory classes, direct immersion in “regular” classes and schools exclusively for newcomers. Introductory classes that have focused on SSL and some subjects have been criticized, among other things, because the decision for the students’ transmission to “regular” classes have been based on arbitrary verdicts instead of an evaluation of students’ knowledge development (Nilsson & Bunar, 2015).

Newly Passed Regulations

To guarantee equity and equality in education for newly arrived students, new regulations were passed in January 2016 (Regeringen, 2014). The consequences of the amendments concerning compulsory schooling included explicit demands and regulations for screening students’ knowledge, introductory classes and an adjusted timetable. One important change requires that screening of student’s knowledge and experiences must be completed within two months after the student’s arrival. The result from screening forms the basis for a principal’s decision regarding how the student’s further education shall be organized, planned and accomplished: introductory class or direct immersion; mother tongue teaching; bilingual scaffolding; or other supportive efforts (Regeringen, 2014 [the Government]). The Language Introduction program in upper secondary was not the target group for the new regulations since they are

regarded as having a supportive organization for newly arrived students. Yet, their competencies should be screened for further planning of their education.

School principals in Sweden have great responsibility and a significant role in organizing supportive structures and a culture that recognizes the centrality of learning for all students. This task is not unique to Sweden. Schools are, in general, as Lumby & Heystek (2011, p.5) suggest, viewed as important social institutions and education in particular is viewed as “a primary means of facilitating the harmonious development of a diverse society”. Public education itself has been seen as a critical priority in sustaining a democratic society and as one of the few places where citizens of diverse backgrounds can hope to meet and nurture their mutual interests. While this has been a goal all too rarely realized, it is nonetheless a critical aspiration given the paucity of other possible platforms (Begley & Zaretsky, L. 2004; Dewey 1900; Dewey 1916; Mann 1891; Woods 2011). That task becomes more obvious when a group of students whose needs differ from those with whom the organization has had experience enter the school. This includes adjusting the curriculum and supporting a new approach into the classroom in the form of content and teaching style (Anderson et al., 2004; Axelsson & Nilsson, 2013; Hamilton, 2004; Nilsson & Bunar, 2015; Norberg, 2009, 2017; OECD, 2016; Skollagen, 2010).

To sum up: Just as the new regulation regarding newly arrived students came into force with principals being accountable for its implementation, an unexpectedly high proportion of asylum seekers arrived in Sweden. Our study examines the degree to which four selected school principals, organized under such regulatory structures, fared during a *turbulent* increase in the number of refugee students.

We posed these three research questions:

- How did selected Swedish school principals respond to the influx of newly arrived refugee students?
- To what degree, if any, did these principals perceive increased levels of organizational turbulence?
- If any of the principals perceived increased turbulence, were there lasting impacts; and if so were these considered to be positive or negative by the principals?

Theoretical Framework

Turbulence Theory (Gross, 1998, 2004, 2014; Shapiro & Gross, 2013) was used to analyze the data coming from the interviews with the four school principals. Turbulence Theory organizes dynamic forces acting upon organizations into four levels: light with little perceived movement in the organization, moderate with clearly observable but sustainable movement, severe where a sense of control of the organization’s direction seems at least temporarily lost, and extreme where the dynamic

forces are so strong that the organization runs the risk of collapse. The theory also includes three driving forces that, acting separately or together ratchet up or diminish turbulence.

The first of these is positionality or where one stands relevant to the turbulence. To determine positionality, we consider the different groups that exist in the organization (for example the principal, teachers, parents, students) and how the heightened turbulence is viewed by each of these from the perspective of the principals interviewed. We also compared the different approaches that the principals took as they faced the incidence of heightened turbulence in their schools during this period.

The second driver of turbulence is cascading or the tendency of turbulent conditions to build upon each other thereby escalating their impact (Kurlansky, 2004, Morgan 1997, Senge 1990). Schools are typically faced with multiple sources of potential cascades of turbulence such as pressures for improved test results, budget pressures, tensions between groups of students, turnover of key leaders, and contract disputes. The heightened turbulence that is the center of this study did not come into being in a vacuum nor was it sealed off from other issues as if it existed in a silo. Therefore, there existed the potential for this cause of turbulence to be further energized by other pressures in any of these schools.

The third driver of turbulence is stability—meaning how solid or fragile the organization’s foundations are. When we reviewed stability, we considered the schools, their leaders, faculty, and families in relation to the forces that they faced during the time in question. Stability should not be confused with rigidity. On the contrary, in cases of dynamic tension, stability might best be found in organizations that respond flexibly and assertively to the turbulence or even use it to re-culture the school so that it better fits a new set of conditions. The drivers do not work in isolation but impact one another as a system that escalates or diminishes turbulence and so we also looked at the drivers as a whole.

Critical to Turbulence Theory is the idea that there is always some level of turbulence in organizational life and that turbulence may also be seen as a desirable condition, thereby learning how to work with turbulence becomes a desired disposition for leaders. A turbulence gauge was constructed for each school that included the four levels of turbulence and the degree to which the three drivers of turbulence (positionality, stability, and cascading) had a role. This allowed us to compare and contrast the responses of the four schools.

Methods and Analysis

Participating school leaders were chosen using purposeful snow-ball sampling methods based on their reputation, and the fact that they had received newly arrived students (see Merriam, 1998). Four principals with between five and 20 years of experience volunteered: Richard and Liz

were principals for compulsory schools in K-town, Anne was a principal for a compulsory school in H-town and Sarah was a principal for an upper secondary school in A-town (see Table).

Table

Participants' Context

Name	Year of experience as principal	School/context	Migrant students	Newly arrived students
Liz	2	Red School, P ² -6 school, K-town 280 students, Stable middle class district	22	20
Richard	15	Blue School, P-9, K-town, 500 students, socio economic advantaged district	0	16
Anne	5	Purple School, P-9, H-town, 600 students, mixed socio-economic context	400	90
Sarah	5	Green School, A-town Upper secondary, Language Introduction Program,		150

Participant interviews were semi-structured with open and explorative thematic issue areas. The themes focused on their context and the processes used by these principals. In addition to background information concerning years of experience, context and statistics concerning migrant students, the principals were asked to describe how the reception of newly arrived students was organized, what kind of support and challenges they identified, and if so, how it influenced the organization and staff members.

Individual interviews took one hour each, were recorded, transcribed and thereafter sent back to the principals for member checking. The analytical work can be described as a constant comparative technique or a constant comparison of a pattern in the data with research findings and theoretical perspectives (Hjerm & Lindgren, 2010). This included an analysis of the data through the lens of Turbulence Theory. We reviewed each case to determine the impact of the three drivers of turbulence (positionality, cascading, and stability). This involved an evaluation of each driver's turbulent impact. Having established the turbulent impact of each driver we then evaluated the general level of turbulence along four possible levels (light, moderate, severe, or extreme) experienced by the schools. This helped us to better understand not only how turbulent the conditions were, but also what driver or drivers might be most in play.

Various Perceptions and Impacts of Turbulence

As stated above, we argue that organizational turbulence at some level is a constant; what varies is the level of turbulence ranging from light to extreme. We further argue that changes are due to the impact of the three drivers (positionality, cascading, and stability) over a given period of time. A review of the role that the three drivers had at the height of the rapid increase of newly arrived students and at the time of its winding down lead to the following observations: The number of newly

arrived students differed during the study period. This ranged from a few students over a period of months, 20 or 16 (Liz and Richard) to a constant influx of 90 and 150 in total (Anne and Sarah). But the reaction among the principals and staff was not necessarily related to the amount in question. More telling was the school's history, principal leadership and the faculty's experience in matters of diversity. Staff members in Liz's school were concerned about the new situation since their teaching had to change: "My teachers are quite unconfident in meeting with students who don't master Swedish. They are used to a role where they can teach and make demands, now they see themselves as having a supporting role." But the integration went quite smoothly due to, as Liz explains, "our students didn't arrive at the same time and they came from Thailand with no traumatic experiences, there was no problem around them."

The staff members in Richard's schools experienced a bewildering period when facing students with unfamiliar backgrounds (16 in total) "Several of my staff members displayed a resistance to work differently, to cooperate and help each other in this new situation. No one left the school, but I had those who cried."

For Anne and Sarah this period was a real trial. Ann describes the influx as "the last semesters the newly arrived students surged in". Since the students' knowledge should be screened within two months the pressures were really high on the staff members in general and on the SSL teachers in particular. "We were all so tired, it was a constant flow. The teachers needed to catch their breath. I tried to communicate this to the central level but no one listened" (Anne).

Sarah, principal for Language Introduction, said the situation was chaotic. She describes the period of influx as running a marathon from 8 in the morning to 5pm. "So many phone calls, contacts with all teachers I should interview and employ, my concern for my staff who worked so hard." The study groups were adjusted to 7-8 students but now there were 50 students waiting to commence school so she had to increase the groups' size. "The teachers staggered, we have never had such big groups before. We lost control, all routines were put aside, everything collapsed. It was like a state of emergency."

Moderating Activities

Despite the low amount of newly arrived students their arrival had consequences for Liz's leadership and her organization: "I had to stay calm. I listen to the teachers' concern[s], but I have to tell the teachers not to worry." Her focus was an effective use of resources and commenced a closer cooperation with the SSL teacher. She did not have to do any major changes in the organization. The changes were mainly a closer

collaboration with the municipality's receiving school and new employment of teachers with competence for teaching in bilingual classrooms.

Richard also took the staff members' concern seriously. Moreover, with several years of experience of this group of students he shouldered the role of an instructional leader for his staff who had almost no competence in teaching in bilingual classrooms. "With the purpose to calm down and give them tools to cope with this new situation I shared my experiences and knowledge with the staff and gave them examples of successful cases." He also managed to employ SSL teachers and had access to bilingual scaffolding and the latest technology and could create a "language center" in the middle of the school.

At the same time Richard's school was under pressure from the central office due to demands for high grades.

This school is a high-status school expected to have good student outcomes. The grades have declined so better scores are the goal which has had an impact on the teachers' stress levels. This reaction among the staff lasted for a couple of months.

Additionally, Anne had to change her organization rapidly, sometimes with ad hoc solutions. Her SSL teachers got a special task of examining how the organization could assure qualified teaching for new students; new teachers were employed as she expanded bilingual scaffolding and SSL teaching. Her teachers got in-service training in how to teach in bilingual classrooms and also supervision in intercultural education. Those activities were costly and came at the expense of other efforts, but Anne argued: "We know that this situation will last for years so we are planning to develop our methods so we can meet the students' needs [with] sustainability and long term planning. These are important for our students' language development and inclusion."

As the principal for a Language Introduction Program, Sarah and her colleagues already had the organization, routines, and SSL teachers in place and therefore were adjusted to receiving newly arrived students. Her challenge was that the capacity didn't match the need. "I told my teachers I see no end of this situation. The only promise I can give you is that you will never have more than 15 students in your classroom." She managed to keep her promise by employing more teachers and finding temporary solutions for locating new study groups. She was released from responsibility for other programs so she could focus on only one program. She also received a deputy principal just as she was about to collapse from work overload: "When he came I could distribute tasks to him. And he was able to stand up to the assignment. He was my salvation." She organized a school development group including four team leaders and a coordinator as well as her deputy and herself. This group was significant for the expansion of the school's reception of newly arrived students.

The chaotic situation influenced Sarah's leadership as she began to distribute tasks within the organization (Alvunger, D. 2015; Huggin, Klar, Hammonds, & Buskey, 2017).

Earlier I had the notion that I should present prepared solutions to my staff; schedules, goals, the next step in a certain issue or whatever it could be. I thought I should have the right answers. But that kind of leadership isn't fruitful, that is not what leadership is about. Today I give my staff a picture of the prerequisites and challenges so we together can discuss how to move forward. They can give me other perspectives and fill the gaps where I have missed some important information.

Another change described by the principals was that collaboration with significant new actors outside of the school had to be established. Staff at the preparation school, police, social service, and the migration office were new partners which in turn demanded new routines and issues to handle, all important for assuring support for the students and teachers. Anne describes their need for collaboration with psychologists as significant since "We have female students who have been captured by IS, raped and abused, so they and the teachers really need professional support."

Since many of the youths come without parents, collaboration with custodial families and housing staff was a significant task, especially for Sarah. "Meetings with custodial families, housing staff and the school are significant to get a holistic view of the students' situation. [We] have a tricky task gathering all people around the student."

Diversity, Integration and Challenges to the Status Quo

The cases also illustrated how this new group of students awakened emotions and revealed a school's and school district's culture and attitudes toward the other. Richard, who describes his context as a conservative and comfy group where Swedishness is extremely overrepresented, received reactions. "My teachers asked, 'what do I do now?' 'Who will take care of this group of students?' They had several suggestions all aiming to exclude the newly arrived students from ordinary classes." Also, the parents reacted and asked how Richard could guarantee their children's safety when receiving students with migrant backgrounds.

In Anne's school, as the number of students with overseas backgrounds increased, she noticed a tendency of losing ethnic Swedish students. She gave an example: "A parent called and asked for the percentage between Swedes and immigrants. 30/70 I replied and she hung up." Attempting to attract students with Swedish backgrounds and counteract segregation, the school developed some extra-curricular activities such as art and football, things other schools cannot offer.

The school's responsibility for inclusion had to be emphasized by the principals not only to staff members but also to those who are expected to receive these students after their introduction period. "Diversity and integration are not a joint concern as it should be. We always have to intrude and raise the inclusion issue in meetings with other programs. Today all such activities depend on individual teachers who are engaged in this group of students" (Sarah).

To sum up: The arrival of these students led to important consequences for all principals. Despite the uncertain forecast of how many and when, they received new arrivals in a positive fashion, doing their best to help them integrate with other students, while at the same time maintaining their existing programs. In their opinion the more diverse the student body, the better. They saw that moving the school's structure and culture towards an inclusive school practice held benefits for all students no matter their background. Their main challenge was to find qualified staff and/or classrooms to accommodate all of the new students. Yet this was not a task for one person. The importance of distributive leadership, inclusion and collaboration with significant actors such as mother tongue- and SSL teachers, and actors outside school became evident.

Conclusion

This exploratory study demonstrated that school principals responded to the increased influx of refugee students in various ways. Connecting their responses was a consistent perception of heightened organizational turbulence. Among their perceptions was a divide where some considered the turbulence as a problem to diminish while getting back to a "normal" state while others found ways to change their schools to better respond to dynamic situations by taking advantage of turbulent conditions.

This demonstrates the possibility of turbulence being used as a constructive force in rapidly changing situations. Further, the study found instances where the three drivers of organizational turbulence, positionality, cascading, and stability (Gross, 2014) were in evidence. Leaders who were able to understand the perspective of variously held positions within their schools (teachers, students, parents) were better able to guide their institutions. Those who understood the cascading impact of pressures facing faculty, in the form of increased responsibilities, fewer resources, and new instructional challenges were also better prepared to support their teachers. Finally, those who saw stability as compatible with serious organizational change were most able to reshape their organizations to meet the new realities of our era.

Since we believe that the top priority of public schools is to prepare the rising generation to be effective and engaged democratic citizens, the findings of our study seems highly relevant in the current era. Given the general political and social conditions facing Swedish schools, and for that matter schools in the rest of Europe as well as

in the United States, we believe that a new set of skills are increasingly relevant. This means encouraging school leaders and their faculties and communities to look beyond the pressures of test scores as well as the political pressures to limit who is part of the greater "us". In order to move in this direction we believe that Turbulence Theory offers us a way to work with the pressures of this era to benefit our students and widen the moral and democratic qualities of our institutions. We argue that these findings support enhanced understanding on the part of school leaders of the levels of organizational turbulence they face, the three forces that drive that turbulence and the possibilities of using heightened turbulence to further innovation. Our hope is that future studies will focus on creative uses of turbulence for schools that are redefining their school communities and the people they seek to serve. In addition we hope to revisit the schools in this study to better understand the legacy of this turbulent period and its lessons. By doing so we hope to get deeper insights into the inner life of these schools as they evolve.

Notes

¹ To be entitled to mother tongue tuition the student must use that as his/her daily language of intercourse and also have basic knowledge of that language. The municipality does not need to fulfill the requirement if there 1) is no suitable teacher and/or 2) are not a minimum of five students in the municipality with a certain mother tongue. Exceptions apply for the national minority languages (Skolverket, 2008).

² P = preschool class

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