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Addressing Cultural Diversity in Swedish Literature Education Through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP): Proceed with Caution

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With large-scale migration, nations, communities, and schools find themselves urgently needing to address issues of diversity. For literature education to be culturally responsive, which entails assisting students in navigating diversity and ambiguity, teachers and students need to recognise, utilise and respectfully query the diverse cultures they identify with, encounter or may encounter. To enable such education, I argue that inspiration can be taken from culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). However, to recontextualise this American pedagogy in a Swedish setting, local contexts must be recognised, with three aspects in particular to be considered. Firstly, CRP focuses in part on race, and Sweden as a society likes to think of itself as 'colorblind', which can contribute to teachers feeling uncomfortable with dealing with issues related to race and diversity. Secondly, essentialist views of race and cultures must be avoided. Thirdly, teachers need to offer literature education which acknowledges how aesthetic aspects of literature can result in readers empathising with some people while distancing themselves from others. Literary features such as estrangement can also help us see what we take for granted and open our eyes to what we are blind to.

Keywords: colorblindness, culturally relevant pedagogy, ethics of reading, literature education, race

Introduction

Today's world is characterised by migration – whether forced or voluntary. As a result, many people live in societies where diversity lays the ground for both positive synergies as further perspectives and insights may be offered and discord in the form of discrimination and marginalisation. Schools play a vital role in counteracting the discord and taking advantage of the possibilities that diversity brings. This paper takes the position that literature education can be said to be culturally responsive when teachers and students recognise, draw from and respectfully query the diverse cultures they belong to, encounter or may encounter. Such education can play a role in creating social equity, as students are given the opportunities to reflect on their own conceptions and presuppositions while also recognising those of others and appreciating the need for counteracting prejudices and injustices between and within groups. But what is needed if this is to happen in the literature classroom? I argue that the field of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) holds some answers for literature education in Swedish schools.

CRP addresses issues of diversity and equity in relation to the many cultures people live in or are affected by (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). The field originated in the United States in the 1990s and has spread to other parts of the world. Proponents of CRP argue that developing 'cultural competence', in the sense of both being aware of one's own cultures and those of others, is vital in society (e.g. Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 2021a; Morrison et al., 2019; Samuels 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This fits well with the role of literature in the school subject of Swedish in upper secondary school, as it is meant to help students gain knowledge about 'the surrounding world, their fellow human beings and themselves' (Skolverket, 2012). Students should thus experience literature as a way to foster the 'understanding of other people's experiences, living conditions, thinking and conceptual worlds' (Skolverket, 2012). Nonetheless, Swedish school curricula have been criticised for encouraging a monocultural and monolingual norm (Hyltenstam et al., 2012; Persson, 2007). Moreover, Zilliacus et al. (2017) caution that there is a 'lack of explicit inclusion of all students as multicultural' (p. 177) and that 'students may be relegated to remaining "the Other" if they must look outside Sweden for their culture or if they are instructed to view cultures as static and separate' (p. 177). Therefore, there is work to be done in making language and literature education function in a culturally responsive manner.

Gay (2015) asserts that, what she calls 'Culturally Responsive Pedagogy', is internationally relevant if it is 'nuanced to fit the specific characteristics and needs of these different settings, relative to societal dynamics, and student ethnic, cultural, racial, immigration/migration, economic, and linguistic demographics' (p. 125). Therefore, it is necessary to 30roblemat the particularity of the Swedish contexts at various levels (e.g. society, community, school, classroom and literature lessons). Moreover, problematic aspects of implementing CRP have become apparent in other countries and contexts, which needs to be considered. I have identified three areas of concern which give reason for caution but do not negate the potential of CRP in Swedish literature education.

The first area involves the different conceptions and connotations of race found in Sweden compared with the United States, where the pedagogy originated in response to racially marked imbalances. The second is the danger of adopting essentialist conceptions when dealing with culture as a phenomenon. The third vital area involves ensuring that literature is not merely regarded as a means for representing different groups and transmitting important messages. This must be 30problematized, and fiction's particular aesthetic affordances must also be considered. Taking these aspects into account and letting them influence teachers' choices of literary works and ways to work with them in class can enhance the potential of literature education and literature as a source of self-knowledge and lead to the better understanding of various cultures, communities and modes of expression. Before discussing the three aspects further, a brief background to culturally relevant pedagogy is given.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

When American scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, it was as a critical response to a deficit-focused understanding of why African American and other minority groups of students were not achieving the same results as White students (1995a). According to Ladson-Billings (1995b), who built her theory on anthropological ethnographic studies of teachers who successfully teach African American students, CRP entails that:

a) students must experience academic success;
b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and

> c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160)

There is also a strong emphasis on students being held responsible for each other's learning, forming a 'community of learners' (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). In regard to educators, engaging in CRP includes being conscious of the beliefs and preconceptions that stem from one's own background while also being attentive to and appreciative of other practices and views from people with various racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Moreover, there is an imperative for social action, as teachers and students must work towards social equity in school and in society.

Culturally relevant pedagogy in the United States does not solely speak of race in terms of racism and injustices; for example, being Black is also an identity in which people can feel pride and a sense of belonging. In Sweden, the term 'race' does not generally carry as wide an array of connotations – especially not positive ones. It is often associated with Nazism, historical 'racial-biological' pseudo-science and its use being racist in itself (Hübinette & Lundström, 2022). Hence, it is important that conceptions of race are considered when recontextualising CRP in a Swedish context.

'Let's Talk About Race'[1]

When addressing the national context of Swedish education (and society), 'race' proves to be a controversial term. In Sweden, it carries such negative connotations that the term is shunned to the extent that even the 2009 antidiscrimination law does not include it but rather uses a wider definition of ethnicity (McEachrane, 2018). There are scholars who speak of a pervasive 'colorblindness' in Sweden, which is defined by Hübinette and Lundström (2022) as:

> the stance that says that we should not see race, think in terms of race, speak of race, use race as a concept and category, or even use the word 'race', as it, in all these instances, is regarded as unscientific, unethical and racist to do so. (p. 55, my translation)

[1] As should be evident in my text, I use the term 'race' in the sense of a social construction that has material consequences and not as a biological fact.

This position serves to promote a national identity of Sweden as 'an international champion for universal human rights' (McEachrane, 2018, p. 479) whilst denying a past and present infused with the significance of race and whiteness (Hübinette & Lundström, 2022).

Colorblindness has wide implications for education. Arneback and Jämte (2022) argue that ignoring structural racism and individualised forms of racism will disenable what they refer to as 'anti-racist action' in Swedish education. One can add to this Osanami Törngren and Suyemoto's (2022) stance that trying to move 'beyond race' and not use the term 'race' would be flawed 'in the face of persistent racisms, hierarchies and maintenance of power and privilege' (p. 1). What can be seen here is a link between race and racism, and that is certainly addressed in culturally relevant pedagogy, given its call for 'cultural consciousness' that challenges 'social order' (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Regarding the United States, Banks (2001) cautions that many White pre-service teachers see themselves as colorblind and raceless and are often immersed in or adopting middle-class perspectives. Twenty years later, Ladson-Billings relates that 'when I ask my college students "What is your culture?", they often say, "We don't really have a culture. We're just normal"' (2021b, p. 12). This may likely be the case for some teachers in Sweden as well, especially in the light of a nation acting as if 'colorblind'.

Swedish researchers who have looked at questions of race and whiteness in schools show how racial matters are silenced (e.g. Eriksson, 2019; Hübinette & Lundström, 2022; Jonsson, 2018; Kasselias Wiltgren, 2021; Lundberg, 2015; Pérez-Aronsson, 2019). For example, Eriksson's (2019) ethnographic study of two upper secondary art classes shows how race and the *white gaze* are salient features as students work on an art film project but nevertheless are not explicitly addressed in the formal school setting. Eriksson (2019) calls it a 'critical silence in a Swedish antiracist context' (p. 220). In another ethnographic study, Lundberg (2015) follows three different Year 9 classes and the associated staff for three consecutive years in one school characterised by a clear majority of racialised students. Lundberg (2015) concludes that 'the burden of integration and acculturation was on the learner to accept white normativity, the dominant social order, and to comply with monolingual norms' (p. 232). As Lundberg (2015) suggests alternative approaches, she emphasises the opportunity to address White normativity stereotyping and social injustices via the learning outcomes of various school subjects. It is here that introducing CRP in Sweden can play a vital role. It emphasises the need for teachers to be aware of their own conceptions of cultures, diversity

and race and to adopt a stance and a praxis which offer their students a culturally responsive education regardless of subject.

Teachers are aware of the complexity surrounding the various implications of race in school and society. It can cause considerable discomfort (and/or fear) to address or open the floor to discussions about whiteness and racialisation, as doing so highlights social inequities on both a systemic and personal level. In an interview study with Language 1 teachers about their choices of literature, Bergman (2014) finds that teachers are reluctant to bring up diversity-related issues because they fear they are at risk of enforcing stereotypes, are not knowledgeable enough, or are not able to handle student responses and discussions.

This is not unique to Sweden, as it is also discussed by scholars investigating the implementation of various forms of CRP in, for example, Australia (Morrison et al., 2019) and the United States (Samuels, 2018). Subero et al.'s (2015) two research projects in Adelaide, Australia, and in Arizona in the United States aimed at utilising the students' backgrounds and prior knowledge – their 'funds of knowledge'. The results show that teachers are hesitant to recognise both 'light' funds and those that are 'dark', which can include such aspects as students' experiences of 'racism, violence, conflict and poverty' (Subero et al., 2015 p. 44). Returning to Scandinavia, Pesonen (2020) recognises reluctance among Finnish teachers to approach topics of 'immigration, war, and racism in their classrooms, some due to their own lack of contextual knowledge, but more often due to concerns about their ability to handle such a potentially divisive topic' (p. 10). As a final example, in a Danish intervention study where three teachers were supplied with a teaching framework for studying a multicultural novel with Year 8 students, two of the three teachers explained that they would not have brought up the topic of cultural clashes in Denmark without having been provided with the teaching materials and support from the researcher (Mansour, 2020).

Overall, there are varying reasons for teachers' discomfort with or reluctance to broach issues related to race or diversity. Not wishing to reinforce stereotypes is a valid concern, but teachers cannot avoid discomfort or risks if they wish to enable change. It is vital to challenge rather than encourage essentialism regarding cultures, diversity and race. This brings us to a second area of concern when recontextualising CRP – its proponents' various views of culture.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Views of Culture

In the educational research that brought Ladson-Billings to formulate the tenets for CRP, she held an anthropological point of view on culture. In an article from 2017, she remarks,

> It is important to emphasize the dynamic and fluid nature of culture that is much more than lists of 'central tendencies' or worse, 'cultural stereotypes'. From an anthropological perspective, culture encompasses worldview, thought patterns, epistemological stances, ethics, and ways of being along with tangible and readily identifiable components of human groups. (Ladson-Billing, 2017, p. 143)

Throughout the decades since Ladson-Billings introduced her conception of culturally relevant pedagogy, other proponents of various asset-based pedagogies such as Geneva Gay, whose first edition of *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* was published 2000, have chosen more vacillating standpoints regarding the conception of culture(s). In Gay's third edition from 2018, she asserts that culture is dynamic and changing but speaks about ethnic groups in a way that suggests more static and essentialised understandings of ethnic groups. For example, while speaking about communication, she mentions intragroup variety and that 'ethnic interactional and communication styles' are not 'static attributes of particular individuals', (Gay, 2018, p. 90) while at the same time, refers to dichotomous communication patterns that appear to label in a stereotypical manner. The third edition of her book also includes bullet-point lists of 'practice possibilities' after each chapter, which, if not treated mindfully, may encourage essentialist and reductionist views instead (Gay, 2018). For example, the possible implications of advice such as the following can do more harm than good: 'In teaching diverse students of color, limit the amount of information conveyed at one time, and use simple and direct explanations that are free of cultural encoding' (Gay, 2018, p. 140). Such advice is meant to be interpreted within the entire framework of the book, but given such wide understandings of culture and how to think of group(ing)s, there is a substantial risk that teachers will enact essentialist approaches to cultural and racial matters in their teaching as they try to follow Gay's advice.

The literature contains several empirical examples of reductive and/or essentialising approaches by scholars or teachers (commented in e.g. Sleeter, 2012; Morrison et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Sleeter (2012) describes four instances of flawed CRP: when it is reduced to cultural celebration; when it is trivialised into 'steps to follow rather than understanding it as a paradigm

for teaching and learning' (p. 569); when it essentialises cultures; and, finally, when it *'substitut[es] cultural for political analysis'* (p. 571). This latter behaviour 'involves maintaining silence about the conditions of racism and other forms of oppression that underlie achievement gaps and alienation from school, assuming that attending to culture alone will bring about equity' (Sleeter, 2012, p. 571). Such behaviour can include colorblindness if this manifests the notion that there are no structural injustices in connection to race and/or ethnicity in school. Moreover, a mixed methods empirical study by Szelei et. al. (2020) demonstrates further instances of teachers claiming to have espoused CRP perspectives and practices while their praxis suggests otherwise.

Given the potential problems in the realisation of CRP, why then should it be considered for recontextualisation? CRP should be considered because it stems from research on teachers who *do* offer their marginalised pupils academic success, cultural competence and opportunities to work against social injustices (Ladson-Billings, 2005b). Therefore, CRP carries great potential, but it is not easily realised, as there is no simple checklist of steps to be followed. Instead, it entails a whole set of beliefs to be adopted which demand much self-reflection and an awareness of local contexts as well as systemic conditions. Moreover, CRP's implications for various school subjects must be considered.

Regarding literature education, there is a risk that literature chosen by teachers, or the teaching approaches to it, can encourage a static conception of cultures and essentialist labelling and stereotyping of people or groups. This can happen if literary works are chosen with an unreflected idea of 'representing' a certain group of people without questioning the implications of representation itself and who is represented by whom and as what, in what way. For example, Swedish literature scholars have problematised the idea of the 'immigrant author' in literary studies and criticism (Nilsson, 2008, 2010; Jagne-Soreou, 2021), showing how it can turn into an 'ethnic filter' (Nilsson, 2010) and be racialising and homogenising (Trotzig, 2005), as novels by particular immigrant authors are meant to represent 'the immigrant experience' in Sweden.

Researching multicultural literature in schools, Mansour (2020) demonstrates how American multicultural education offers both pedagogical and literary definitions of multicultural literature. The pedagogical definitions relate more to what 'pedagogical ambitions' the teacher has with using the text than to how the text is written (Mansour, 2020, p. 29). Different pedagogical definitions demand that the text is written by a member of the minority group portrayed (making claims

towards 'authenticity'), and some even require the portrayal of the minority groups to be positive to provide role models (Mansour, 2020, p. 30). Mansour (2020) problematises this and offers another definition of multicultural literature that includes a greater focus on how the text is written rather than who has written it. Mansour also notes the criticism of Swedish scholars Andersson and Druker, who warn that pedagogical intentions to limit multicultural literature in education to solely works that show positive images of marginalised groups will gloss over 'social issues and injustices, within minority groups as well as in relation to the majority culture' (Andersson & Druker, 2017, p. 11, my translation). Moreover, Andersson and Druker caution that if the term 'multicultural' is not problematised, there is a risk that the culture(s) of the dominant majority remains an uncontested norm, thus 'reproducing existing relations of power' (2017, p. 11, my translation).

The discussion above focuses on what counts or could count as 'multicultural literature', and Mansour (2020) has not looked at what literary conceptions are present or could be present in literature education informed by culturally relevant pedagogy. It is important to emphasise that culturally responsive literature education should not be seen as something that would only deal with 'multicultural literature'. Given that cultures and identities can be seen as fluid yet relevant to everyone regardless of colour or ethnicity, I argue that any literature can be read with an approach informed by culturally relevant pedagogy. Otherwise, one could easily make whiteness, or whiteness being problematised, invisible. Literary scholar Therese Svensson does not write with a school setting in mind but nevertheless introduces a style of reading that could be recontextualised in this setting. In her dissertation, she investigates the 'possibility of decolonial readings' (Svensson, 2020, p. 271) going beyond a colorblind reading of three Swedish works by Karin Boye, Ludvig Nordström and Hjalmar Söderberg. Therefore, talking about race, whiteness and its implications must be part of the conversation and literature education. Moreover, a literary conception that purport to be culturally responsive must include classroom activities that acknowledge the aesthetic aspects of literature.

Aesthetic affordances of literature

It would be too reductive to only focus on *what* a work says without acknowledging *how* it says it. There are narrative techniques and stylistic devices that allow literary texts to affect readers in ways

other texts do not. Some scholars suggest that literature is exceptionally well adapted to empower students with empathy and 'narrative imagination' regarding issues of diversity (Fisher, 2017; Nussbaum, 1997; Rorty, 1989). However, there are also those who question whether literary works automatically encourage empathy with others (e.g. Jurecic, 2011; Keen, 2007; Lindhé, 2015, 2016, 2021; Persson, 2007).

Lindhé (2021) presents an 'ethics of reading' that she contrasts with Nussbaum, arguing that 'as much as literature invites us to feel ourselves into the other, we are also involved in creating new others' (p. 226). Consequently, Lindhé (2021) introduces the notion that 'literature offers more than the possibility to empathize with others; it affords the opportunity to widen our field of perception even further by alerting readers to their own habits of othering and through this self-recognition become ethically responsible' (p. 227). Lindhé also explains that the teaching of literature can provide 'occasions to explore the darker aspects of humanity' (2021, p. 226). In that case, the teaching will not shy away from the dark funds of literature or the dark funds of knowledge of the students (Subero et al., 2015). This stance on the affordances of literature opens for readings that can widen readers' perspectives and understanding of what it is to be human – warts and all – regardless of whether they are reading a work that would be considered 'multicultural'/'world literature' or not (Lindhé 2015). This perspective entails challenges for the teacher who is to help students be(come) aware of various insights that can be gleaned from reading a particular work. However, it is also an opportunity to engage with the mechanics of 'othering' in a wide range of texts.

Other aspects of the aesthetic affordances of literature are interesting too. In a study of university students who took courses in literature studies (including pre-service teachers qualifying as Swedish teachers), Agrell (2009) and Thorson (2009) make the case for not overlooking the importance of having students appreciate the unique 'literariness' of fiction. Inspired by Wolfgang Iser, they speak of both an 'aesthetics of response' and an 'aesthetics of reception', meaning that an appreciation of not only themes and messages in literature is needed but also an awareness of how the literature works aesthetically. Furthermore, Agrell (2009) and Thorson (2009) introduce a discussion of Viktor Shklovsky's theory of 'estrangement' in literature and also the idea that alienation can have certain potential (e.g. Agrell, 2009, p. 31, p. 42). What becomes vital here, is a focused and reflective

form of reading which is expected in higher education and is to be encouraged in upper secondary school as well. Agrell (2009) states,

> An important aspect in the teaching of literary science, therefore, ought to be to make the students aware of how they read and have them practice critically reflecting on their form of reading and its theoretical conditions. Because the critical reading skill is not only a part of the literary scientific competence that the students are trained in, but it also helps them identify ideological restrictions and coercive authorities that affect their own lives – outside of academia. (p. 21, my translation)

These ideas of having students experience and understand instances of estrangement and the potential for ambiguity and diversity within literature (and life), as well as making them critically read not only texts but also society, appears to resonate well with aims of culturally relevant pedagogy. This is particularly the case if reading literature is meant to increase students' understanding of 'the surrounding world, their fellow human beings and themselves' (Skolverket 2012), as previously noted.

Like Lindhé's theory of empathy and othering in literature, Agrell's and Thorson's texts show how demanding literature teachers' work can be when they read texts professionally to prepare for lessons where their students will meet the text and each other. Agrell (2009) also points to the need to train literature students to be able to shift perspectives, elucidating what literary features may cause ambiguity or estrangement in the literary work and contribute meaning, thus equipping the students with 'tools to discover both the diversity of the text and their own aspect blindness – and all have *some* blind spot' (p. 66, my translation)[2]. As the idea of estrangement makes clear and as culturally relevant pedagogy posits, people need to see what it is they take for granted in a new light. Literature and close reading can help both teachers and students with that.

Conclusion

[2] Agrell borrows the term 'aspect blindness' from Wittgenstein, and she illustrates his theory with a drawing of a figure that can either be seen as a hare or a duck, but not both simultaneously. To be able to discern both the duck and the hare respectively, one must be able to 'shift in aspects' (Agrell, 2009, p. 66).

As an asset-based pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021a), culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on the potential of education that recognises diverse cultures as something to be harnessed as well as scrutinised, rather than as something to be marginalised or neglected. Therefore, it resonates with the curriculum for Swedish at upper secondary school, which is meant to enable students to learn more about themselves, the world, and the cultures they belong to or encounter. The position in this paper is that CRP is a field which holds potential for making Swedish literature education culturally responsive in a manner which can challenge colorblindness and assist teachers in overcoming the discomforts they may experience addressing race and ethnicity in the classroom. CRP requires teachers to become aware of their own pre-conceptions and ideas of cultures, race and ethnicities to offer students an education that recognises differences and similarities while challenging social injustices.

This paper has argued how discussions on culture and race and ethnicities can evoke discomfort and feel strange, especially in relation to a Swedish discourse of colorblindness and anti-racism. However, literature teachers cannot refrain from working with literature that allows for challenging but potentially rewarding discussions on salient features of people, everyday life and societies.

Adopting a pedagogy from another context is not without its challenges. In this paper, I have highlighted three aspects to be wary of. First, the ways that the social construct of race is manifested in discourses in the United States, where culturally relevant pedagogy originates, are complex and not entirely similar to the discourses in Sweden. In Sweden, race is a much-stigmatised concept and one that official discourse attempts to move past (Hübinette & Lundström, 2022; Osanami Törngren & Suyemoto, 2022). Nevertheless, however stigmatised issues of race and ethnicity are in Swedish education, to remain silent on these matters is not a reasonable path forward. Discourses of colorblindness are present in the United States as well (Bonilla-Silva, 2017), but there are also discourses regarding identity where race is something to be proud of. Culturally relevant pedagogy recognises both these alternatives (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Therefore, as CRP is recontextualised in Swedish literature education, there must be an awareness of contextual differences and similarities.

A second aspect to be wary of is the essentialising of cultures, ethnicities and race. Mansour (2020) demonstrates how certain pedagogical approaches to multicultural literature can promote stereotyping or the glossing over of problems within minority groups. Likewise, Swedish scholars

problematise racialising literary categories such as 'immigrant literature' (Jagne-Soreou, 2021; Nilsson 2010; Trotzig 2005). I would also argue that only focusing on multicultural literature does not make for culturally responsive literature education, as this can leave whiteness unmarked or unproblematised (cf. Svensson, 2020). Hence, recontextualising culturally relevant pedagogy must entail this broader view of what literature can be read in a culturally responsive manner.

Thirdly, the way in which literature is approached is vital too. It may be easy to look for diversity, race and ethnicities as themes in literature or as represented by certain characters. However, this would negate the aesthetic affordances of literature. Lindhé (2015; 2021) demonstrates how readers can become aware of *how* they are urged to empathise with certain characters and not with others. One central lesson in culturally responsive literature education is thus the awareness of how easily one can engage in 'othering' (Lindhé, 2021, p. 227). Moreover, literary theories of estrangement can also be helpful in prompting readers reflect on what they take for granted and why.

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