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Is Mother Tongue Instruction Culturally Empowering?

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In this paper, I formulate a position on the dissemination of 'cultural empowerment' in schools through a critical discussion of its relation to my research field, mother tongue instruction (MTI) in Sweden. In addition, I compare the ideals of the culturally empowering pedagogies and praxis of MTI, which I see as related through the underlying utopian visions of the multilingual and multicultural school. Both are forms of education which place a focus on the validity and importance of students' individuality and their pre-existing knowledges from outside the curriculum. In discussing the marginalisation of MTI via the discourse of its threat to 'Swedishness', I hope to highlight some of the underlying problems inherent in cultural empowerment as an individualising practice carried out within the universalising framework that is the state education project. The implementation of MTI demonstrates a need for change targeted not only at the level of teachers and researchers but also at a level where legitimacy is granted to such change.

Keywords: culturally empowering education, mother tongue instruction, culturally relevant pedagogy, agency, legitimacy

Introduction

The aim of this position paper is to explore what culturally empowering education is and how it relates to my research field, mother tongue instruction (MTI) in Sweden. I ask whether MTI is culturally empowering and what its implementation can reveal more broadly about culturally empowering pedagogies. As a starting point, I would like to take a closer look at the expectation that 'cultural empowerment' is a vision that ought to be disseminated by me, in Sweden, through my role as a teacher educator and participant in the national research school, Culturally Empowering Education in Language and Literature. In *Educare's* call for this edition, it states that 'educational practices that respond to the variety of cultural trajectories among pupils, students, and teachers, need to be *critically developed* [my emphasis] to sustain and improve learning for all'. Fundamental to a critical stance is the investigation of commonly held assumptions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which I take in this case to be the view that we know what cultural empowerment is, that it ought to be disseminated in Sweden, and that it offers some solutions to established educational problems. A Bourdieusian stance on sociology invites researchers to consider how such putative social problems become the responsibility of scientific inquiry to solve – a relationship that runs the risk of reproducing said assumptions (Bourdieu et al., 2014. Building on this notion, I first discuss the idealised dissemination of culturally empowering education, and then the actual dissemination of MTI. I propose that these disparate phenomena are related to each other through the underlying appeals to equity in education that underlie their existence in research and practice. They also both idealise individualised forms of education, taking as a starting point the student's own background yet simultaneously relying on the universalising framework of the state-sanctioned school system for legitimacy.

What is culturally empowering education?

A key theory covered in the exploration of what an empowering education entails is that of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). Underpinning CRP is the desire to make education more responsive to individual students' needs in increasingly culturally diverse societies, not only in the United States but also worldwide (Morrison, 2019). It emerged in response to academics in the United States' perceptions of injustice in the education system (Banks, 1998; Gay, 2018) and is therefore defined as 'emancipatory' (Morrison, 2019, p. 23), 'caring' (Banks, 1998, p. 15; Gay, 2018; Morrison, 2019, p. 27) and concerned with 'social justice' (Subero, 2015). It is founded on the idea that 'socially diverse groups are more innovative than homogenous ones' and that modern

schooling should assist heterogenous groups of individuals to develop 'relational competencies' (Gay, 2018, p. 22), given that students live mainly with, and near, others who are like them and need to learn how to live in a wider diverse society. This is particularly important as specific groups in society are, and have traditionally been, marginalised in the macro level context that foregrounds education (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Accepting students' differences while simultaneously adhering to 'monocultural and monolingual' (Morrison, 2019, p. 2) educational and societal norms results in teachers taking a 'deficit view' (Gay, 2018; Morrison, 2019) of student attainment, namely that these deficits need to be corrected rather than viewed critically. Important in countering such views is 'self-efficacy' (Gay, 2018, p. 32) – the idea that students must start from a solid foundation of self confidence in order to participate effectively in education.

One way which Ladson-Billings (1995) encourages teachers to promote such processes is by tapping into pre-existing 'social power', namely the co-constructed hierarchies among students in a group (p. 160). This enables naturally occurring exchanges of information and ideas to play out in the classroom and transforms potentially disruptive action into a force for positive learning. Another concrete strategy is to encourage students' ability to 'code switch' (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162) between different discourses in different settings, which is vital for not only including them in their present register in the given setting but also for training them for a diverse society in which they will have to communicate with different others. CRP therefore advocates that teachers be 'orchestrators of social contexts for learning' (Gay, 2018, p. 52), which requires a change in the power dynamic inherent in teaching wherein the teacher should be a researcher rather than an expert (Subero, 2015). In this way, students gain agency over their own learning in the micro-universe of the classroom – an agency which they can use in the macro universe of society (Szelei et al., 2020).

In addition, effective CRP strategies act as bridges to home communities (Subero, 2015), encourage the expression of students' pre-existing 'linguistic and cultural repertoires' (Morrison, 2019, p. 24) and give students access to 'ethnic teaching material' (Gay, 2018, p. 36). They share 'communicative frames of reference' (Gay, 2018, p. 36) and provide opportunities for 'authentic language use' (Gay, 2018, p. 98). While it is noted that 'naïve efforts to include cultural content can tokenise, reify and/or misrepresent the dynamic cultures and knowledge bases of marginalised populations' (Morrison, 2019, p. 37; see also Szelei et al., 2020, p. 179), it is not ethnicity but rather 'positive attitudes towards cultural diversity' that are more important in CRP (Gay, 2018, p. 127). As part of

this, a 'syncretism of practices' (Wearmouth, 2017, p. 17) is encouraged, in which teachers and students construct linguistic practice together in the classroom with links to the home. Furthermore, teachers often tackle challenging teaching situations, which Subero terms 'dark funds' (2015, p. 45). These involve difficult or taboo experiences which should be given a safe space to be expressed.

Language is integral to these processes, and indeed, heritage language programmes in the United States are shown to facilitate CRP (Gay, 2018; Leeman et. al., 2011). Children learn more effectively and with greater agency and investment when able to interact with peers and texts in the language(s) they feel most comfortable. There are also power structures inherent in language use in schools, and heritage language programmes in the United States are sometimes viewed as decolonising tools that empower students to revitalise and maintain the languages of their communities (Morrison, 2019). Drawing named languages into the discussion of cultural empowerment adds an additional and complex dimension to the understanding of culture, as inherent in the indexing of such languages is the indexing of the particular (national) groups who speak these languages. It is here that a discussion of the role of MTI in Sweden can serve as an example of how state-mandated, culturally empowering *language* pedagogies might look when given different circumstances in which to develop.

What is mother tongue instruction (MTI)?

In Sweden, all students in compulsory education who regularly speak a language other than Swedish in the home are entitled to weekly teaching in that language. Sweden's provision of multilingual education in the form of MTI is founded on both a history of struggle in recognising marginalised native minorities and a 1970s movement towards language pluralism (e.g. Hyltenstam & Milani, 2012). MTI has since evolved to cater to the growing and ever more diverse society in which it now operates, with language centres across the country providing teaching and study guidance in over a hundred languages to schools which require them. The national curriculum stipulates content for the 'national minority' languages (*nationella minoritetsspråk*) of Finnish, Yiddish, Meänkieli, Sámi, and Romani Chib, and for other 'mother tongue' languages (*modersmål*). The founding principles of the 'home language reform act' that laid the ground for MTI in 1977 were 'equality, freedom of choice, cooperation' (Swedish: *jämlikhet, valfrihet, samverkan*) (SOU 1974:69), so chosen as a result of an ideological shift from assimilatory to integrative views of immigration.

The specific nature of the relationship between politics and academia in Sweden means that MTI rests on a strong legal foundation constructed through collaboration with research bodies (Salö et al., 2018) and has been a research object as well as an applied practice since its inception. Notions of identity and minority language struggle were given a theoretical underpinning via North American research and research visits (Salö, 2021, p. 157), and reading material that informed the key immigration commission of 1968–74 of contemporary psychological research into displacement and identity crises (Schwarz, 1971; Trankell, 1971). The commission pushed for the legal enshrinement of the fundamental right of immigrants to maintain their existing group belonging and languages within the larger Swedish context (Wickström, 2013; SOU 1971:51). The idea that learning one's mother tongue contributes to cultural empowerment by working against a 'cultural hegemony' (Wickström, 2013, p. 33) can thus be seen as a foundational principle of MTI. Indeed, when it was enacted in the curriculum of 1980, it was said to represent a 'multilingual ideology' that worked against a monolingual norm in Swedish schools (Municio, 1987).

Today, the heterogeneity of Swedish classrooms is greater than ever, with 40% of all children in compulsory education having been born outside Sweden or have at least one parent born outside Sweden. The majority are from regions without a long history of migration within the Nordic countries (Hübinette & Lindström, 2022). Swedish statistical bodies do not collect data on race and ethnicity, but data on country of birth and language spoken are used to infer information about population diversity. The number of students entitled to MTI has more than doubled since 1997 (SOU 2019:18), and it continues to rise. Today, around 30% of all students are entitled to MTI, although the number of students who do in fact attend is around 17% of the total school population (Skolverket, 2022). According to an official report by the national language council of Sweden, MTI 'can be said to represent multilingual Sweden; it is a symbol not only for how the state views and values MTI itself, but also the overarching role and position of minority languages' (Spetz, 2014).

Despite a growing need for multilingual support in schools and increasing numbers of students, the uptake of MTI as a percentage of entitled students has remained steady, and the subject occupies a marginalised position (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015; Spetz, 2014). While MTI is a curriculum subject with legal and bureaucratic support, just as any other, it operates on an opt-in basis, with lessons conducted outside the regular school schedule. A comparatively low number, 37%, of all MTI teachers nationwide have Swedish teaching certification, although 96% of these

teachers have immigrated to Sweden and it is not reported whether they hold documentation from elsewhere (Skolverket, 2023). Where teachers do have teacher certification, there are few professional development courses in their field to promote the lifelong reflective process that teaching represents (SOU:2019), which is available to teachers of other subjects. There is also disparity in how MTI is implemented. Teachers are sometimes employed by schools allowing for greater relational agency with other teachers, students and processes, but otherwise they are often itinerant between a number of schools (Hedman & Magnusson, 2022). Moreover, the subject is administrated differently by each school, and the curriculum is open to differing interpretations by the language teachers, as there is no national training programme in the mother tongue subject (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015; Straszer et al., 2022).

Furthermore, MTI is marginalised via societal, media and political pressure to no longer be regulated or funded via the state.[1] A common root to these arguments lies in the perception of MTI as detracting time and resources from the learning of Swedish (Spetz, 2014), and therefore also tacitly, the process of assimilation into Swedishness. In neighbouring Denmark, MTI is no longer provided by the state to non-EU children as a response to political pressures around the learning of Danish (Salö et al., 2018). The success of this movement is also used to bolster a similar movement in Sweden (c.f. Motion 2021/22:2921). In the agreement written between the current coalition partners of the Swedish government, there is a clause promising an official investigation into whether MTI affects the uptake of Swedish, thus hindering integration (Liberalerna, 2022). The formulation of the research question that this investigation is supposed to answer is being debated, with opponents viewing it as a means to find reasons to deregulate the provision of the subject (Interpellation 2022/23:234). As this debate also demonstrates, when it is argued that MTI detracts from Swedish, there are two common counter-arguments: 1) that MTI helps develop identity, and therefore, a strong sense of self, and 2) that the learning of the mother tongue is instrumental for (Swedish) language aptitude – a particularly recurrent theme (Hedman & Rosén, 2020; Spetz, 2014; Wingstedt, 1998). The reduction in discourse of the role of language to identarian or instrumental functions is not restricted to this Swedish context (Grenfell, 2011; Brubaker, 2004). As Porto (2010) writes in an Argentinian context, there are difficulties inherent in challenging societal norms about the instrumental value of language education within a global skills

[1] To give just a few recent examples, 1) https://kvartal.se/artiklar/modersmalsundervisning-utan-tydligt-forskningsstod/ 2) https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7570193 3) https://skolvarlden.se/artiklar/sd-larare-och-elever-ska-bara-prata-svenska-i-skolan

economy. Her suggestion – that literacy-based, individualised, 'culturally relevant' pedagogies can counteract these views – is an unintended perpetuation of the same identity/instrumental dichotomy at work in debates around MTI.

A critical stance on cultural empowerment necessitates a critical stance on this binary. Preoccupations with finding ways to prove or disprove the value of identarian or instrumental features of language learning is consistent with a tendency within social science to 'receive from the social world it studies the issues that it poses about that world' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 238) and, paradoxically, via state-sanctioned research, imbue them with an objectiveness worthy of research. Presupposing the identarian and instrumental 'values' of MTI and cultural empowerment, even in the name of social justice, is to take for granted the relational states of the circumstances on which this value is based rather than look directly at these relational states.

The value of education

The few directly implementable findings from the many studies of CRP in practice (Bottiani et al., 2018) and the request for an inquiry into the effects of MTI despite extant research are reflections of these research projects as 'particular cases of the possible' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1991, p. 75) which are contingent on relational properties. There is great disparity in the way that CRP is implemented, as the agent or agents responsible for such projects in schools change from case to case, the follow-up research differs, the aims are varied, and so forth (Bottiani et al., 2018, p. 375). The objectivity demanded of empirical research is described as an 'unattainable ideal' for the pedagogical researcher (Banks, 1998, p. 5). If objectivity is understood in the Bourdieusian sense as knowledge granted legitimacy by those with the power to grant it (Bourdieu, 1991), then pedagogical research that does not grapple with forces which are involved in the delineation of legitimate/objective knowledge about pedagogy will struggle for legitimacy – in much the same way that MTI does in practice (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015).

Friere (2000), a source of inspiration for many working for social justice within the education system, notes the unwillingness of those benefitting from the status quo to enact changes to education. CRP (Banks, 1998; Morrison, 2019) and MTI (Hedman & Magnusson, 2022) research give particular attention to the role of teachers in working against perceived cultural and linguistic hegemony, highlighting the necessity of their agency and motivation for working against this status

quo. If teachers are to encourage critical standpoints from their students, it is claimed that they must be trained in critical thought of 'the curriculum, and the values that support the institutionalized structures and practices in the schools' (Banks, 1998, p. 14). Further, if given 'opportunities for reflection upon the implications of teachers' beliefs on their practice' (Shealy, 2007, p. 16), then it is claimed that they will be more likely to work towards cultural empowerment for their students. While closer collaboration between research and teaching practice is suggested as a means to help develop teachers' critical perspectives, a difficulty that CRP wants to tackle is that researchers are often outsiders and do not carry enough weight within the pedagogical groups they research to enact change (Banks, 1998; Bottiani et al., 2018). This presupposes that researchers are for some reason more likely than teachers to work against, and disseminate scepticism of, established (legitimate) education structures, even though they work within an extension of the same structures. There is also a presupposition that teachers want to, or can, take a critical view of their role and that their views have a bearing on the institutionalised structures and practices mentioned. It is fully possible for teachers and researchers to believe they are working against a perceived status quo while also perpetuating it. Teachers, even those who are critical and culturally empowering, necessarily invoke hierarchies and necessarily bring their own 'learned and internalized oppressions' to their perceptions of exchanges (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 308).

As Bottiani et al. (2018) report, teachers unwillingly engage in social desirability bias, claiming in interviews to engage in practices that they in fact only *wish* they engaged in. Meanwhile, standardised grading, set curricula and time constraints for teaching are identified as reasons why teachers avoid 'cultural diversity' as a topic and focus more on the form rather than function of knowledge. These contribute to rigid teacher expectations and the limited use of varied textbooks and literature, which in turn, limits students' opportunities for self-expression and can even cause disengagement with lessons (Gay, 2018; Szelei, 2020). Similarly, research into multilingual practice in some MTI classrooms and multilingual study mentoring suggests that there is more focus on linguistic form rather than use (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015; Reath Warren, 2017). Studies into mother tongue and heritage language education identify that teachers' preconceptions of their 'home' culture are communicated in the classroom, often through simple call-and-response dialogue rather than open discussion which leaves space for students' expression (Karrebæk & Ghandchi, 2015). In general, it is difficult to avoid narrow ethnonationalist categorisations, even when working to cultivate an awareness of avoiding such practices (Skelton, 2002). Pervasive ideas about what is correct and

what is incorrect, standard and non-standard, are carried over into the mother tongue classroom, even though the needs and backgrounds of the students are far removed from the origins of these ideas (Ghandchi, 2018). From a theoretical perspective, claiming the objective validity of responses in MTI involves additional problematic dimensions, as 'mother tongue' is, in and of itself, a troublesome ideology (Hutton, 1999). The packaging of the mother tongue or minority language classroom as a space for teacher-sanctioned identity development falls foul of the same essentialising logic that causes hegemony/minoritisation to exist in the first place (Kroon, 2003). Time and curricula pressures for MTI make it a difficult place to cultivate the multilingual ideal enunciated politically and theoretically as a boon of language learning, as there is hardly enough space for the mother tongue being taught (Ganuza & Hedman, 2017).

In a CRP framework, despite that set criteria are named by teachers as a hindrance to their explicit teaching of cultural topics, success as a culturally responsive teacher is dependent on students meeting objective standards (Gay, 2018; Rychly & Graves, 2012). Rychly and Graves (2012) go so far as to define care as 'a descriptor for teachers who are unwilling to tolerate underachievement' (p. 45), based on Gay's (2018) definition of caring as holding diverse students to the same high standards while understanding, that is to say, having empathy for, their varied backgrounds and prior knowledge. In order to do this, teachers should educate themselves on the wide range of cultural practices represented in their classrooms and even 'experience what it is to be a member of a nondominant culture' (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p. 46). Teachers' abilities to adjust and adapt fixed criteria according to individuals is also reflected in the revised 2022 curriculum for MTI. It features slimmed-down grade criteria, formulated specifically to allow teachers wider opportunities for their own interpretation and application and with the caveat that grading should be carried out from a general perspective and not with focus on specific details (Skolverket, 2021). The idea is not that objective criteria should be removed, but that there should be more scope for local interpretation. However, tacitly implied for both MTI and CRP is the idea that, in order to exist at all, or have any legitimacy at all, multilingual and multicultural forms of education must conform to existing monolingual and monocultural forms of schooling through the alignment of regulation and criteria.

This is despite the fact that, with regards to MTI, parents are unlikely to cite academic merit as a motivation for enrolling their children, and participation drops as students reach grading age (SOU 2019:18; Spetz, 2014). These phenomena suggest that a sense of accomplishment marked by

meeting objective standards is not a primary motivator for attending. In fact, student agency, a key feature of empowering education, comes forth in the MTI classroom when teachers are brave enough to lose the reins or when the reins are forcibly removed, such as during distance lessons during a pandemic (Hedman & Mannish, 2021). Linking caring with helping students meet objective criteria is inherently at odds with the critical perspective on hegemonic structures of education that empowering forms of education purportedly encourage. There are several important corollaries to be considered if care is indeed defined as holding high (objective) standards and encouraging students' academic accomplishments (Banks, 1998; Gay, 2018; Morrison, 2019). The teacher who, for structural or personal reasons (or because of a pandemic), cannot hold objective standards may be said to not care about their students. In addition, teachers who lose interest or motivation in fulfilling obligations related to grading and assessment because of the stressful, unpopular and undervalued nature of their work may also be said not to care about their students. Mother tongue teachers, who specifically earn less than other teachers despite the complexity of both the teaching and study guidance roles, might be said not to care about their students if they move to another line of work. These conclusions are uncomfortable because research shows that roles in which individuals cite an expectation to care, that is, to emotionally invest in another person, are overwhelmingly underpaid, low-status, and staffed by already structurally oppressed groups (Criado-Perez, 2019).

There is, in short, much pressure on teachers and their good intentions to bring equity to education. But placing responsibility for the overarching enaction of a utopic ideal in schools avoids first grappling with seemingly objective, fixed, and taken-for-granted 'myths' that teachers can end up reproducing (Ellsworth, 1989). Brubaker (2015) argues that this is the effect of

> work influenced by the cultural and discursive turn [which] focussed more attention on identity and difference than on inequality, and more attention on inequalities in recognition than in resources. … losing traction on structural forms of inequality grounded in the division of labour, the organisation of production or control over the means of coercion. (Brubaker, 2015)

With regards to this 'organisation of production', MTI was ratified as Home Language (*hemspråk*) in a reform of 1977, thanks to the work of agents in contexts where they could actively shape the law and the societal view of multilingualism (Salö, 2021). Doing so involved subverting an existing discourse of the importance of disseminating Swedish as a national project and turning the logic

of that argument against itself. It is my position that this intial legitimising act goes some way towards protecting the anomalous existence of very specific forms of state-sanctioned, non-Swedish language practices that otherwise clash with the 'guise of universality' (Bourdieu, 1996) claimed by the Swedish state and the state education apparatus. While cultural empowerment as a concept seems to want to contest the overarching universalising nature of education, replacing monocultural and unyielding forms of instruction, course material and communicative practice with adaptive measures, it claims legitimacy through its association with static forms of assessment and does not problematise the role of school as a branch of the state – itself a broader universalising project. Culturally or linguistically empowering projects that focus on the role of teachers and researchers as disseminators of alternative views on society need to also grapple with the structural limitations placed on teachers and researchers.

Conclusion

The starting point for this position paper was to critically assess what culturally empowering education is and draw parallels with aspects of MTI. Although MTI is an extant subject and cultural empowerment is an idealised school of thought, my view is that a discussion of the former, with its basis in a similarly inclined school of thought, is a concrete means of discussing the latter. Empowerment, brought about through allowing students agency over their own learning, reducing the authoritative role of the teacher, making more space for the individuality of the student rather than imposing the universality of the school, and allowing for diversity in language use, reading materials, and ideas, is difficult to achieve in an educational framework that works to reproduce a particular kind of society. In the specific case of MTI in Sweden, this opposition is made possible because minority language education was granted legitimacy within and by the universalising framework (the state). The marginalised status of MTI is the result of its precarious existence, ratified by law but in contradiction to discourses of homogenisation around Swedish and Swedishness. Indeed, homogenising practices are at work within the MTI classroom just as much as they are without. Expecting teachers to be intermediaries between theoretically empowering pedagogies and actual practice, no matter how much they care and want to do so, is asking them to enact opposites. The legitimate implementation of 'cultural empowerment' therefore depends on a consideration of how legitimacy might be granted to such a project within the very specific (American, Australian, etc.) contexts in focus. Without this, teachers and researchers working for

cultural empowerment will be seen as subverting, rather than complementing, the overarching aims of the school.

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