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History teachers working with high-school students' identity in a multicultural society

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and clarify the need, in the Swedish context, for a shift of perspective within the field of research. A shift, that is, from earlier studies which focused primarily on the challenges and problems that history teaching encounters in a multicultural society, to a project that examines examples of how history teachers deal with such challenges and work with students' identity in their multicultural teaching.

Keywords: *history teaching, identity, multicultural society, globalization*

Introduction

The emerging multicultural society has brought new challenges for school tuition, which has given rise to multicultural research. This is a field of research in progress where much remains to be done, not least central for identity issues is study about history teaching. In the paper I suggest the need for a shift in perspective within the Swedish field of research. A project is proposed that examines examples of how history teachers deal with challenges and work with students' identity in their multicultural teaching. Therefore, the paper will start with in a brief survey of the Swedish field regarding multicultural education – or as often referred to in Western Europe – intercultural education. Based on theories of multicultural education, an analytical tool consisting of four possible strategies for teaching will be suggested: A universal approach, a communitarian approach, an approach based on multiple identities and a strategy based on critical multiculturalism (See further below).

The purpose of the proposed project may be embodied by the two following aims:

- To focus on teachers' practical experience of teaching, describe and clarify working models that can help teachers work with students' identity in a multicultural society
- To analyse and generalize teachers' educational experiences from four possible strategies rooted in theories of multicultural education.

The proposed project starts from the three didactic questions of what (content), how (methods) and why (intentions) teachers teach history in the way they do. A brief description of some interim results, from an initial survey of the recently started project, will be presented, and finally, some concluding reflections round off the paper.

Background: The position of history teaching in Sweden

Over the past 100 years history writing and the emergence of History research have had a crucial importance in the development of both national identity and the image of “the other”. Late into the 1900s, a primary function of history teaching was to administer a Swedish national identity. This role of the history school subject has partly changed with globalization and the emergence of a multicultural society, which appears clearly from the policy directives and the national curriculum. Still, there are clear unisexual, monocultural and Eurocentric elements in content, focus and perspectives of both history writing and history teaching. This image of the limitations of school in the multicultural society is further enhanced by the growing number of students leaving school and failing to graduate. At the same time, teachers often find it difficult and feel insecure at work with students in the multicultural society. However, there are also teachers who feel that they have found working models in their multicultural teaching. Since it is important to move ahead in this complex area, the selection of participating teachers in the proposed project are guided by their claims to have developed working models of multicultural teaching.

Examples of Swedish research efforts in the field

There are two common characteristics for most of today’s research on multicultural education. The first is to emphasize the importance of individuals not carrying singular identities, but are included in several contexts, which define multiple identities. These contexts or groups are for example family, social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. Second, is to look at identity formation as not once and for all given, but as an on-going process (See for example Bhabha 1994, Butler 1993, Hall and du Gay 2008, May and Sleeter 2010, Nussbaum 1997). Parts of the different theoretical positions in international research are also represented in the Swedish research area on multicultural education that is in focus here.

In an anthology about intercultural education in theory and practice, teacher educators and researchers from Södertörns University present example of subject-specific applications of intercultural pedagogy. In the 1980s intercultural education meant a "desire to create an understanding of immigrants' ethnic uniqueness and thereby increase the potential for a conflict-free coexistence in the Swedish society" (My translation. Lahdenperä 2004, p. 16). During the late 1990's and onwards the terms multiculturalism and diversity became the starting point for an education that "at the same time should promote cultural identity and knowledge of and respect for other cultures" (My translation. Lahdenperä 2004, p. 16). In this anthology the historian Kenneth Awebro presents a project for developing an intercultural pedagogy archive where students with both Swedish and non-Swedish origin had the opportunity to look at and reflect on archival material from different cultures and countries (Lahdenperä 2004 pp.114-116). This is only one concrete example of how schools can work towards greater integration and understanding in a multicultural classroom, in aspects such as for example minorities' desire to preserve their culture and Swedes meeting with non-Swedes. This is also the type of concrete examples that the proposed project intends to document and put forward.

History didactics aim to link the historical content - the science and the outside world - with the knowledge of students and their learning (Bo Andersson, 2004). Didactic research on the role and identity of history as a school subject in the multicultural society is relatively new and has been implemented to a limited extent. In his thesis, Kenneth Nordgren (2006) formulated a central question to the field of research: "How do the multicultural experiences influence the reach of history writing? Or conversely, through which historical consciousness do we consider our time?" (My translation: Nordgren 2006, p. 13). His studies find that the content of Swedish policy documents is unclear and partly contradictory when it comes to the objectives of developing students' intercultural competence. Nordgren's analysis shows that textbook authors have had problems in adapting their writings to society's multi-cultural development as well as to the intercultural ambitions in policy documents. Textbooks are still largely monocultural and leave a limited space for non-European and global history (Nordgren 2006, pp 217-218). There are additional textbook studies that confirm how teaching materials bring about a Eurocentric portrayal of other cultures and the dichotomy of "us vs. them". (Ajagan-Lester 2000, Kamali and Sawyer 2006, Palmberg 2000)

In his doctoral thesis, Vanja Lozic (2010) also problematizes the subject of history in relation to the multicultural society. He explores the relationship between young students' ethnical identifications and their views on the subject of history (Lozic 2010, pp. 12-13). In the so-called communitarian school and identification policy a starting point is that teaching should build on pupils' ethnic identifications. However, Lozic sees obstacles to such a policy because students express much more complex cultural identities than the proponents of a communitarian policy claim. Instead, Lozic suggests that students and the history teachers' positions have more in common with a so-called universalistic approach to the multicultural society (Lozic 2012, 297-299).

Some theoretical considerations about identity

School is a public institution and its influence over young people's identity formation is huge and in this process the subject of history has a special role. This appears from one of the aims for the subject of history: "Students should also develop an understanding of the present and the ability to orient themselves for the future" (My translation. Ministry of Education, "Subject Plan for the subject of history", 2010-12-02, p. 25). Stated differently, the emerging global and multicultural society, involves new demands on *how* our past is portrayed and interpreted. Neither is identity formation or history writing something that is once and for all given. An individual's identity does not consist of a stable core with a beginning and an end without being influenced by the shifts in history. And our cultural identity is not limited to one group based on a shared history or ancestry. Instead, identities are often scattered and fragmented, never singular, but multiple and often constructed by crossing and antagonistic discourses and positions (Hall, S. and du Gay, Paul, 2008, pp. 4-5).

Based on theories of identity in a multicultural society an analysis tool is developed making it possible to distinguish at least four approaches and strategies for teachers work with students' identities.

An analysis tool: Four possible strategies for teachers work with students' identity

The school is a public context where students' identities are represented, constructed, challenged and changed. It appears clearly from the Education Act and other governing documents that school should work for the recognition of different groups and that all people are equal regardless of origin or identity. The implication of this goal has been to promote equal rights and opportunities, such as right to an equal education and that school should clarify and promote students' (and parents') rights and obligations to actively participate in the democratic process of society (Curriculum: Lgr11). Amy Gutmann underlines that the educational system has a task to equip students with necessary skills to maintain and develop democracy with the aim to treat all individuals as equal citizens regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Gutmann 1999, p. 41). The goal here is to promote universal and individual-based rights and freedoms, based on an assumption of consensus regarding the common good, by which inequalities between individuals and groups should be avoided. This *universal approach* is clearly linked to liberal political values (Gutmann 1999, Taylor 1994). However, it has been criticized for treating people in a difference-blind way and denying their identity by forcing people into a supposedly neutral form. A form that, in fact, reflects a hegemonic majority culture (Taylor 1994, pp. 51-52).

The modern notion of identity in a multicultural society has also given rise to a *communitarian approach*. Some researchers suggest that the communitarian approach characterized the Swedish multicultural school policy during the 1970s (See, e.g. Lozic, 2010, pp. 38-39 and Lahdenperä, 2004, p. 16). This "politics of difference" declares recognition of the specific identity of an individual or group. Behind the demand for recognition there is also a principle of universal equality through condemning discrimination. But here, instead of everyone's 'equality' (equal value) for rights and opportunities, it is groups' 'diversity' towards others that are safeguarded. The aim is that these differences need to be recognized and protected from being ignored by or incorporated into the majority identity (Taylor 1994, pp. 46-47).

Most researchers dealing with multicultural education emphasizes that individuals do not have singular identities. Humans are included in several contexts, such as family, social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, sports, etc. All of these contexts influence the identity formation process. Amartya Sen develops the notion of multiple identities further from serving as a clarification within the field of multicultural research to also playing a crucial role for the construction of questions and analysis within the area. According to Sen, being critical towards the communitarian approach, the "politics of difference" tends to point at the concept of culture as the causal factor in problematic social situations in multicultural contexts. In addition, the communitarian approach tends to emphasize the need for cultural preservation (Sen 2006, pp. 109). Stated differently, the communitarian approach requires the existence of minority groups in the public sphere that are defined or define themselves by singular identities. By questioning this notion of singular identities and instead clarify the importance of multiple identities, which also gives us the freedom to prioritize and change identities, a third strategy of *multiple identities* could be formulated. According to Sen, the hope of harmony in our world rests on the diversity of identities, which overlap each other and prevent sharp

boundaries and dividing lines. Our common humanity is endangered if diversity is reduced into a universal classification system (Sen 2006, p. 31).

Finally, the strategy of *critical multiculturalism* originates from British anti-racist scholars and is based on a neo-Marxist perspective. Its proponents claim that multicultural education seldom is conducted from a neutral starting point, but by the standards stated by the majority society, which are rooted in a liberal policy. Based on this, the universal approach is criticized for describing all humans as equal citizens. This directs attention away from the multicultural society structural inequalities and power relations between groups. For similar reasons, critic is directed against the idea of multiple identities: Since people are not living under similar conditions, they have not equal opportunities to select and prioritize what identities they wish to highlight in different contexts. Individuals and groups' spaces for influence are limited by structural forces of capitalism, racism, colonialism and sexism. Culture and Identity are here understood as being multilayered, fluid, complex and subject to multiple social categories that are constantly reconstructed through participation in social situations. The implication of this type of structural analysis in school is to challenge power relations by identifying how power is used and institutionalized and, through collective forces, working for changing such power relations (May and Sleeter 2010, pp. 5-10).

Preliminary results

In the proposed project data material will consist of alternating classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews with teachers and pupils and the collection of local policy documents. As part of this broader project two partial studies have been carried out. First, an initial questionnaire survey was conducted in 2011, which primarily aimed to scan the area and identify teachers to participate in interviews. Second, during this spring, seven interviews with history teachers were conducted. A brief description of some interim results of these initial interviews follows here. The teachers were selected on the basis that they had a reputation for being talented and ambitious. In addition, the choice of the participating teachers were made from the criteria that the teachers felt that they have developed working models for their teaching in relation to students' identity in a multicultural society. In a longer term, the choice of participating teachers will also be guided by the goal of "theoretical saturation". The seven teachers being interviewed are briefly presented in the table below.

Table 1.

Respondent	Age	Active years in the profession	Class background	Geographic origin
Female teacher 1	31	3+9*	Lower middle class	Small town, Swedish
Female teacher 2	33	5	Working class	Small town, Swedish
Female teacher 3	40	15	Lower middle class	Small town Nordic
Male teacher 1	35	4	Middle class	Small town, Swedish
Male teacher 2	44	15	Working class	Town, Swedish
Male teacher 3	46	15	Middle class	Town, Latin America
Male teacher 4	57	20	Middle class	Town, Sweden

*9 years work as unauthorised teacher

The project departs from the three didactic questions of what (content), how (methods) and why (intentions) teachers teach history in the way they do. Initially, teachers were asked to give some general thoughts regarding what working with students' identity meant to them and how it influenced their selection of content in history courses. All teachers agreed on a broad definition of a persons' identity based on several contexts or groups, such as family, social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. Furthermore, they also agreed on the importance of paying attention to students' identities in history teaching. However, the teachers also stressed, and especially the female teachers, that they were not used to thinking in terms of working actively with students' identities. Instead, the female teachers underlined the importance of getting to know the students in order to design the teaching in a way that make the students feel the history subject relevant. Female teacher 3 expresses her concerns about working with students' identity in terms of being careful not to force students into an identity based on their background. Instead, students should be given the opportunity to choose which identity they want to use in the school context. In her focus, female teacher 3 uses the words "diversity" and the "little mankind" and gives an example:

We talk about that boundaries do not always follow national boundaries; that a fisherman in a coastal community in western Sweden easier identify with a fisherman in Normandy, than with the man from the inner city of Gothenburg. Although they are very close to each other geographically, they can live very different lives. (Interview with female teacher 3, February 29 2012)

In their choice of content the three female teachers all put efforts to make the teaching exiting; to meet the students in their reality of time and space, and most of all, they gave priority to processing and analysis of the content rather than to the importance of content itself. In addition, they said to be more guided by the curriculum, and less by textbooks, than was the case for their male colleagues. Female teacher 1 being critical to the textbooks put it as:

At the school where I work, many elder teachers are using materials that are very Euro-centric and don't problematize the division of epochs and then... It's convenient and easy to use, but year after year you consolidate what is in there. This takes no account of the multicultural classroom. (Interview with female teacher 1, April 4 2012)

Both the male teacher 2 with a background in the working class and the teacher of Latin American origin (male teacher 3) highlighted the importance of social class to understand students' identity. They pointed out that immigrant background and lower social class frequently overlap. Male teacher 3 said that it is important to consciously make use of the different origins present in the classroom. He does not say it explicit to the students but wants them to link their learning to their own origin. Male teacher 2 expressed strong views on how the choice of content and method should be done to help the weakest students:

So, when you talk about the school adapting to different social practices, in my

world the result is that students who come from homes with a good study habit, also bring a lot of school culture with them. They are doing fine no matter what the school looks like. [...] I believe that if the school does not have clear structures for what we expect from our students, the weakest will lose. From that perspective, I think it is an advantage that there is clear governance in school. (Interview with male teacher 2, March 28 2012)

The priority of clarity and structure in teaching is also shared by the female teachers 2, 3 and male teacher 4. In concrete, the latter develops a matrix where students can compare different elements in history. Furthermore, he would never teach without the textbook because it is a good support for the students who are not so strong. The textbook gives them a good structure. The male teacher 1 and the male teacher 4 both base their selection of content on the students' choice of high school programs. For instance, a student of the building programme could expect elements of architecture in the history courses and students in aesthetic courses are taught several cultural features in history than other student groups.

When the interviews focused on what methods the teachers used, all teachers (except from female teacher 3) stressed that their work clearly differed from what was common among their colleagues. For instance, female teacher 2 describes herself as an enthusiast with high ambitions, which is not always appreciated by her colleagues; they might feel their own level of ambition is questioned, she suggests. The male teacher 1 builds up environments for his history teaching. As an example, he describes how stories from ancient mythology are best performed around a fire in nature. He expresses it as; if you are not engaged and interested yourself, this profession could kill you. The male teacher 3 expresses his working model as; he challenges his students all the time. When I ask him what motivates his teaching, he answers.

The most important thing for me is to give students, what can I say... self-confidence on the basis that they have a story. Regardless of where they come from, they all have a story. It's important to understand why you are at this very spot right now. I think it is the most important and I do not think you can do it if you do not have a relationship with your students. I think I have a pretty good relationship with my students. (Interview with male teacher 3, March 28 2012)

One question concerned what teachers thought to be the most important competences/knowledge their students should develop. The male teacher 4 responded quickly that it was to provide the students with general knowledge. Just as male teacher 3, he said that focus is to strengthen the students' identity and self-esteem. Other teachers stressed academic competences to be more important, such as source-critical perspectives, analysis capabilities and the development of a historical consciousness. The male teacher 1 expresses his position a bit philosophically:

I think it is ... the basic idea that ... you should be critical of everything around you, it is mostly a construction and a flow in a historical context that has contacts back in time. There are very few things that are naturally given ... that man not influence on. (Interview with male teacher 1, April 13, 2012)

Given that students groups are composed of students with varying background and qualifications, the question was asked regarding which students that best responded to the teachers' methods and goals, and if the teachers had specific groups of students in mind for their history teaching. All teachers mainly termed the differences within classes as being between strong and weak students, although their intentions were to reach all students. The female teacher who described herself as an ambitious and demanding teacher added:

There are many teachers who are focused on the low-performing students and want to help them. I am a bit opposite there. It may be incorrect to admit, but I want to help students who really want to get further. There is so much focus on all those who are not performing, so the others, who are actually talented and who need to get further, ends up in the background. (Interview with female teacher 2, April 2 2012)

The female teacher 3 was a bit ashamed to admit that she probably mainly directed her teaching to the talented and dedicated students. She also had her main experience from teaching students in academic programs. The two youngest teachers – female teacher 1 and male teacher 1 – were both convinced that their alternative models of teaching reached all groups of students. They expressed their efforts to achieve empathy and commitment with people from the past as a language that everyone could embrace and understand. The male teacher 3, who use to challenge his students, admits that not all students immediately manage to respond to his expectations. The students that respond best to his teaching are those with similar background as him. They are used to reading texts and to discussions. He takes care of the weaker students by giving them more time and explanations.

One of the final questions asked in the interviews was what the teachers would do if they had totally unlimited resources and time to freely carry out their history teaching. Some of the responders answered that they would do what they already did today, although morewell thought-out and carefully elaborated. Female teacher 3 would work more actively with illustrative and thought-provoking examples from film and literature. Today, she considered film viewing as more of a respite in the daily work. Three of the teachers responded the question that they would leave the classroom and take the teaching and the students out into the real world. Male teacher 3 put it as:

I would be out all the time. Out on the historical sites and meet ordinary people. Who were not historians, but who could tell you much, much better, about the war in Lebanon, the history of Latin America's Indians or anything else. (Interview with male teacher 3, March 28, 2012)

Female teacher 1 put it as, “to do different tours and museums to learn from other storytellers, other actors... Yes, museums, archives, film, music.” The male teacher 1 expressed the most far-reaching plans:

Now I am talking about completely unlimited resources! I would like to let the students experience history. Making history alive with environments, with techniques, with feelings ... Actually, I want them to feel what it was like to live

as a human being in historical time, which is an impossible task, and a fairly pointless project, because it's in the past and it is lost, but ... it is a tempting thought. Yes, indeed! (Interview with male teacher 1, April 13, 2012)

From some few examples based on limited data, it is not possible to draw any substantive conclusions from these initial interviews, but some preliminary reflections can be made, which will round off the paper.

The significance of the planned project and some concluding reflections

To start from the end, all the teachers expressed, although in different ways, that with more resources and time they would provide a history teaching closer to real life in terms of both experiences and storytellers. This effort is consistent with the teachers' other expressions to make history relevant and alive for the students. However, although the objectives were similar, the teachers expressed quite different teaching methods to reach their students.

Although the numbers of respondents were few, it is interesting to note some correlation between the teachers' teaching models and the four possible strategies for teachers' work as presented above as an analysis tool. To begin with, it seems not as if the individual teacher prefer one approach before another. Rather, various strategies are used in various combinations. The female teachers' methods have some similarities with the universal approach. They all claim the aim to reach all students with similar content (although adapted to the individual) and methods to develop academic skills such as source-critical perspectives, analysis capabilities and developing a historical consciousness. None of the female teachers mentioned that different student groups' identities should provide a basis for the teaching of history. At the same time, they underlined as important that different perspectives of history must be highlighted such as gender, globalization and class. The unwillingness to attribute students with diverse identities may also be compared with the strategy of multiple identities that emphasizes individuals' right to choose their identity (see for example, female teacher 3).

In a manner, similar to the communitarian approach, the male teachers 1, 3 and 4 express the importance of highlighting the students' different identities in their teaching. Male teacher 3 says that it is important to consciously make use of the different origins present in the classroom, while the male teachers 1 and 4 based their selection of content on the students' choice of high school courses. However, the male teacher 4 also underlines the mission of developing active community citizens, an aim that is recognised from the universal approach.

The male teachers 2 and 3 highlighted the importance of social class to understand students' identity and pointed out that immigrant background and lower social class usually overlap. It is worth noting that these teachers themselves have a working class and an immigrant background respectively. Male teacher 2 and 4 both expressed the importance of structure and clarity to help the weakest students. The male teacher 2 also expressed how students from homes with a good study habit, also brought a lot of school culture with them. This link to structural injustices may be compared with the strategy of

critical multiculturalism.

These initial and very preliminary results create more questions than answers: Could it be interesting to thoroughly study the relationships between teachers' own background and political values and how they perform their teaching? Which teaching models and strategies provide the best results taking into account different student groups' identities and capabilities? How important is the teachers' access to time and resources for quality of teaching? To what extent do teachers teach the way they say they do and to what extent do they express themselves in terms of what they think is expected of them?

From the examples of Swedish research efforts on the field it has appeared that the main focus has been to identify and investigate the problems that have arisen when the school could not meet the new conditions and needs that have been developed, with the Multicultural Society. Furthermore, earlier research has mainly focused on textbook studies and students' experiences of and views on the teaching of history. As for history teachers' teaching experience and ideas, research has been limited in a Swedish context.

The proposed project will develop the field of research from at least three aspects:

1. To identify and analyse problems in order to examine how teachers handle them in the practical teaching situation,
2. The project visualises the teacher's role in realizing the goals formulated in policy documents,
3. The combination of teachers' experience and theoretical approaches can from a Swedish context develop new ideas of multicultural teaching within the school subject of history.

The significance of the project can also be formulated from a societal perspective, which follows from school's role to combat segregation, discrimination and marginalization. As we saw earlier, identifications include gender, class, ethnicity, housing, religion, hobby, social relationships, etc. How the multicultural classroom is composed differs between regions, cities, rural districts and school classes. In the suburbs are the multicultural classroom problems often most apparent where inadequate resources, large classes, high teacher turnover, etc. limit the school's ability to offer all students the right to an equal education. However, even in monocultural classrooms in rural and prosperous areas is multiculturalism an important issue to tackle in relation to students' identity in a multicultural society.

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